Episode 126: Reem Hajjar

# KL: Katie Linder

# RH: Reem Hajjar

# KL: You’re listening to “Research in Action”: episode one hundred and twenty-six.

# [*intro music*]

# Segment 1:

# KL: Welcome to “Research in Action,” a weekly podcast about topics and issues related to research in higher education featuring experts across a range of disciplines. I’m your host, Dr. Katie Linder, research director at Oregon State University Ecampus, a national leader in online education. Along with every episode, we post show notes with links to resources mentioned in the episode, a full transcript, and an instructor guide for incorporating the episode into your courses. Visit our website at ecampus.oregonstate.edu/podcast to find all of these resources.

On today’s episode, I am joined by Dr. Reem Hajjar, an Assistant Professor of integrated human and ecological systems in the Department of Forest Ecosystems and Society at Oregon State University. She is an interdisciplinary social scientist and studies the relationship between forest and livelihoods, and how various governments, mechanisms and institutions such as policies, norms, and markets shape that relationship. Most of her work to date has taken place in tropical and subtropical forests, with a recent extension into the Pacific Northwest of North America. Most recently she’s been working on projects related to community based forest management in Mexico, global reviews on community forestry and small scale forest enterprises, gendered impacts of land grabs in Ethiopia, impacts of forest policy changes in Ghana, and cattle sector certification in Brazil.

Thanks so much for joining me in the studio today, Reem.

**RH**: Thank you for inviting me!

**KL:** So I’m really interested because you’re coming out of the field of forestry, and this is an area that is pretty popular here at Oregon State, but a lot of people may not know what it is – so let’s start there. For people who are unfamiliar with the field of forestry, can you offer a description of the discipline? What are the kinds of things that get studied and explored?

**RH:** Sure. I guess one thing I’d like to start off with is that it’s really hard to see it as a discipline, because it incorporates so many different disciplines in this term forestry. In the past we used to think of forestry mainly as people cutting down trees, and knowing how to grow them again to cut them down again. And I’m sure that’s probably what it was like a few decades ago, but since then we’ve really evolved a more holistic view of the forest. And now – I mean we still have the forest engineers and such, and the silviculture – the people who are like experts at growing trees, but now forestry encompasses so much more. You have forest ecology, you have people concerned with people, humans and their relationship with the forest, and policy, and materials that come from the forest that you can use for other products. So our College of Forestry here at OSU is a good example of that. We have a department that’s focused on forest engineering and harvesting aspect, but then we have a Forest Ecosystems and Society department – so looking at the ecological aspects and the human aspects to it. We have a wood science department there too that also look sat using timber wood products as renewable materials, and in architecture, and all that sorts of stuff. So it’s really blowing up to be everything that evolves around forests basically.

**KL:** Okay so I have lots of questions about this (go for it). First of all – I mean, this may sound like a silly question, but I’m curious how you define forest. Because like here in the Northwest, and people who know the Northwest may have a sense of what is a forest – and it looks like certain kinds of trees, but I would also imagine that this work would be very different in like a rainforest setting. So are you encompassing all of those different environments when you talk about forestry? Like how are you defining a forest?

**RH:** Right. So there are actual technical definitions - internationally accepted definitions about what constitutes a forest. It has to, you know, have a certain amount of tree cover, canopy cover over x number of hectors, and the trees have to be of a certain height to qualify as that definition of forest. So yeah, all of the forests you see around us obviously fit in that definition, rainforests fit in that definition, a lot of dry forests which look quite different from what you probably imagine uh from forest being in the tropics – you have tropical dry forests, you have montane forests, you have cloud forests, all sorts of different types of forest that fall under this definition.

**KL:** Okay, and what are you specializing in?

**RH:** So I work mostly in tropical areas. So mostly rainforests, but also a bit on the dryer forests side of things.

**KL:** Okay. And then also I’m curious about where do you set the boundary – because you mentioned the work with the trees and also now we’re starting to look at work with humans, but when I think of forest I think about animals, and bugs, and like there’s a whole sort of ecosystem that is happening in these forests. Is that part of the work as well? Like is there a boundary where you’re like, “Nope. We don’t do that. That’s another field.” You know, like where are you setting the boundaries around some of this work?

**RH:** Well, the thing is if you talk to a forest ecologist they’ll set their boundaries around whatever they’re focused on within that forest ecosystem, right? If you talk to a stream ecologist that work in forest they would set it around that sort of area. If you talk to me, anyone who depends on forest for their livelihood, that’s where I set my bounds. And that could include people in the city selling timber. So it really depends on the specific discipline or the specific researcher, and how they’re defining that. But the link is basically “something to do with the forest” - you trace that back to “something to do with the forest”.

**KL:** It sounds like the field could be huge and very interdisciplinary because of that.

**RH:** Yes. It can be interdisciplinary, and I think that’s more of a newer thing now. You still find a lot of people that just focus on that particular bug in that particular forest, but then more and more we’re starting to figure out how these systems are coupled, right? The human and natural systems are very interlinked, and what we do to the forest and what the forest provides for us – these are things that can’t be sort of compartmentalized, but you have to view them as sort of a holistic system.

**KL:** Mhm. Okay let’s dig into that a little more, because I know that’s our area. So a main component of your research is studying the relationship between forests and livelihoods. So tell us a little bit more about what that means.

**RH:** Sure. So livelihoods, you can think of a sort of general definition of livelihoods as what people depend on for their everyday living. So in terms of forests and livelihoods, this could mean a forest dependent livelihood being someone who cuts down trees for a living, it could – and this is more generally the case in the areas I work in – it’s not just cutting down the trees, but it’s getting your substances from the forests, your sustenance from the forests, relying on the services the forests provides to you. That could be goods like timber or non-timber products like fruits, and mushrooms, and nuts, and things like that. It could be services like relying on the watershed services – clean water coming from an intact forest. It could be, a big thing here in Oregon is recreation, so that’s considered a forest service. Being able to recreate and appreciate the beauty of our forests. So if your livelihood depends on something related to that, that’s kind of what I look at – forest dependent livelihoods.

**KL:** Okay. So I’m really curious about some of the key research questions that you’re exploring in your work related to forestry and livelihoods.

**RH:** Right. So this is um – this can get pretty varied. I consider myself somewhat of a generalist in that I have my hands in many different pots here. So some – I guess one of the overarching research questions I look at is, how can forests be used as sustainable pathways to prosperity? And I mean prosperity in a very loose, broad term - being improved human well-being. And again, in a sustainable manner. And so under that I have a lot of sub-research questions that depend on whatever context I’m working in. So looking at things like, how do policies shape that relationship between people and forests? How they shape them, they impact them positively or negatively. Look at how community institutions – community created institutions can also shape that relationship and whether or not different interventions might impact positively or negatively people’s livelihoods and their ability to use the forest again as this pathway to well-being and prosperity. Uh this morning I’ve been working on a proposal looking at how linking community innovation and innovativeness, and a community’s ability to be resilient, and robust, and adapt to changes. And this is actually a proposal I’m writing on for work in the Pacific Northwest, and thinking of how that innovation resilience leads to more opportunities for meaningful forest based work in forest dependent communities around here where we are seeing a lot of out migration – people leaving forested areas, forest dependent communities for other opportunities. So how can we think about innovation and resilience in this context to keep people working on forest, but doing something that’s meaningful? And what’s meaningful in forest work nowadays is changing. It’s not just about cutting down trees. So that’s just one example. I’m working on another project, actually a project proposal yesterday and today, looking at communities - indigenous communities in Sabah, Borneo, Malaysia, and thinking about how they’ve been receiving some micro-hydro projects. So trying to make energy locally decentralized through these micro-hydro systems, thinking about how having that sort of project has enabled communities to conserve their watersheds, and what sort of benefits they’re getting from that. So as you can see, it’s just like – I can go on forever listing all of the different projects that I’ve been working on. But yeah, broad picture – thinking about forests as a sustainable pathway to well-being.

**KL:** Okay so one of the questions I always have for people who are more generalists, and I’m really fascinated by this, is how do you pick your projects? Because you can go in, like you said, a million different directions – I mean, do you have a system, for lack of a better word, or do you go like – maybe one research project leads into another, or it has to do with your collaborators. What is kind of leading you from one thing to another?

**RH:** Yeah. I mean both those things you mentioned are definitely contributing to this. You start down one line, you do a project, and you come up with like a million other questions. And so you just follow that sort of stream, and I’ve definitely had that happen. So doing my Ph.D. I worked on looking at community forestry in Brazil and Mexico, and did this whole analysis at the community level, and that just lead me to thinking a lot about institutions sort of support these communities – sort of secondary level institutions that communities still participate in - they had these democratic structures, and they’re sort of extensions of these community forests and they bring together a bunch of different community forests, and they play this role of liaison between governments and communities. They’re fascinating institutions, and I wouldn’t have gotten to that point of thinking about tem without having completed this other work that I did previously. So that’s one path for sure, another path is through collaborators. Uh I wasn’t really thinking about Borneo until I through some people in the college of forestry started talking about in NGO in Portland called Green Empowerment. They’re working on a couple – several different projects around the world, and I started talking to them about a project in Nicaragua which we were writing a proposal for, and they started talking to us about this project in Borneo and it got me thinking about that. So that’s definitely a way forward. Other projects that I’ve started have been through advisors. I did a postdoc at the University of Michigan, and while I was there we were writing proposals and got funding to do work in Ethiopia and Ghana – uh additional work in Ghana. I had already worked in Ghana. So you kind of follow that as well. So in a way it’s depending on – it’s somewhat of path dependent, right? Where you’re coming from kin of leads you to where you end up going, but in other cases it’s kind of opportunistic – and yeah. Especially now in a sort of funding environment that’s a little more crunched you do have to jump on these other opportunities.

**KL:** So I’m interested in learning a little bit more about the stakeholders in your work as well, because your work as you mentioned is kind of local and it’s international. And I’m also really curious about audiences, and who are the people that are involved in both the data collection and also the dissemination – like who is getting these findings, how are they being used? Can you talk a little bit about that? Who are some of the main stakeholders that you’re speaking to, and are they different locally versus internationally?

**RH:** Well I should first of all start with I haven’t actually done any work here in Oregon yet. I’m still trying to find my way here. I’ve only been in Oregon for – I guess coming on two years now, so I’ll speak more to the international scene. Um stakeholders are varied. For the most part I work with communities or small scale forest enterprise owners, and they’re principally involve in the data collection – they’re the people that I’m talking to. But at the same time generally my projects do tend to look at multiscale governments, so thinking about what’s happening at the community level, but then at what’s happening at the government level, the institutions in between and then also the international level, right? So often times I’m also interviewing government officials, NGOs, sometimes private sector individuals – and so that’s how I go about sort of collecting data. In terms of who benefits most from the data – in general my work tries to give – I don’t want to say give voice to communities, because I don’t want to speak for them, but I like to think that my research sort of sheds some light of what’s happening at certain levels that don’t often get seen with the hope that people in the policy making arena would use that information to make policies more just, equitable, ecologically sensible, given that local context. And so that part’s a struggle. You can do all of the research you want, you can publish all of these papers, you can even write policy briefs and such, but having that work be taking up by various policy makers is a different story. Um I’ve worked a few times, and continue to work with certain international NGOs that are based in the U.S., so I work – or have worked closely with the Rights and Resources Initiative, an NGO based out of D.C. with partners all over the place who try to do that. They try to take some of this scientific knowledge and translate it into policy briefs and interact directly with private sector, and policy makers, and such to push forward a certain agenda of local – um pushing for local rights to forest resources and such. So I try to sort of channel my work through people like that who are going to be much more effective at doing that than I am.

**KL:** This is very complex. Like you’re just building the web and it’s getting bigger and bigger, so this is really interesting. Okay, we’re going to take a brief break, when we come back we’re going to hear a little bit more from Reem about some of her work researching internationally. Back in a moment.

The Research in Action Podcast is just one of many projects we work on here at the Oregon State University Ecampus Research Unit. A project that I am particularly excited about is our OSU Ecampus Research Fellows Program, which funds research for Oregon State faculty which is actionable, impacts student learning online, and encourages the development of a robust research pipeline of online teaching and learning at OSU. Recently, our first cohort released a series of white papers on methods and design for distance education research. See the white papers at ecampus.oregonstate.edu/white-papers.

# Segment 2:

**KL:** Reem, as we eluded to in this first segment, you have research that focuses on Mexico, and Ethiopia, Brazil, Ghana and several other locations. What draws you to doing international research? Because as someone who is not an international researcher, sometimes I look at it and think, “Wow that’s a layer of complexity I really don’t want to add to my own work.” So what is it that really draws you to it?

**RH:** Yeah I guess – I might have to go back a bit in my formation as a researcher. Um I started thinking about tropical forests in my undergrad. I did my undergrad in biology at McGill University in Montreal, and I did a semester abroad in Panama, and that was really my first exposure to one, being in a tropical country and two, the topics we would cover were just so fascinating - I mean, tropical ecology, traipsing around jungles. It was really exciting. And then I took this course about humans in the near tropics, and all of a sudden it just clicked that, you know, if we want to conserve these forests or if we want to manage them sustainably, it’s really more about the human side of things, right? And so then I started to delve more into their development, development literature and I kind of ended at this nexus between conservation and development as a way to basically maintain forests while ensuring just and positive well-being in these areas for people who live in and around these forests. And you think about these communities and often they are very marginalized communities that are – have faced a series of horrible things happening to them – displacements, oppression, yeah, complete marginalization. And so that nexus in conservation development is something that really drives me, I guess. Thinking about just and positive development, and development on people – on different people’s terms, so not just development as how we think of development, but at the same time wanting to maintain forests and forests eco-systems so that they are able to provide us with goods and services into the future. Um and so naturally when you start thinking about that nexus between conservation and development you end up looking at so-called ‘developing countries’ more than anything. Although now more and more I sort of engage with work in North America, and you realize a lot of rural communities here face very similar issues. And so that has sort of inspired me to broadening my research into specifically the Pacific Northwest. But – so to get back to what takes me international, um, it really was this idea of thinking about tropical forests and people in tropical forests. And since then I’ve just – I don’t know it’s just fascinated me more and more. There are always just more and more questions. Um and well – another driving factor I think I used to really enjoy – traveling quite a bit. Now I’m a little more fatigued with travel. But um yeah. I think I’ll leave it at that. There’s probably so much more I could say about what drives me to do this work internationally.

**KL:** Well that’s a good start. I mean, I’m always curious too about the logistics of international work. You know like, how frequently are you traveling? You know like, how much time are you spending in these communities? and especially if with your work where you have multiple international sites on multiple continents – is it like, well this year I’m going to go to these countries, and this next year I’m going to go to these other countries, or is it dependent on funding? You know, tell us a little bit more about that! And when you are taking these trips, how long are you there? You know, what are some of the details of how it works out logistically?

**RH:** Yeah. So first I guess in terms of picking some of these sites some of it again I was saying its path-dependent, so you start working in a place and you keep working in a place, and that has a lot of advantages to it. You get to know the context, and the culture, and the language much more in-depth, and that obviously helps the research aspect but also makes the research more meaningful to people that you’re interacting with. So that in-depth knowledge is great for that sort of path dependency of research sites. Um and picking those sites in the first place might depend on who you’re collaborating with, or it might be for a specific academic reason – like I was studying community forestry, Mexico is known as one of the leaders in the world for community forestry, so I chose Mexico as a site for my Ph.D., right? Um then – and I’ve just stuck with that, I keep going back to Mexico. I now have a student working in Mexico as well. Um picking additional sites does present challenges. You’re going to be learning from scratch basically about a new country, new set of politics, new culture, potentially a new language, and that decision is not made lightly usually. Um and presents a lot of challenges in that sense, because it does take a while to get back up to speed.

So—and each country comes with its own set of logistics. I mean, the biggest one being the language barrier. Do you speak the language? If not, can you learn it in a reasonable amount of time? Um working in Latin America, I’ve been fortunate enough, like I speak Spanish, I kind of speak Portuguese – I used to speak Portuguese more when I was working there in Brazil more often. So at least that part was covered, but then again in parts of Mexico you’re working with indigenous communities, and I definitely don’t speak Mayan, or Zapotec, or what have you. So language is a big logistical challenge in some places. Um but again just contacting communities, making your networks, that is – it really depends on the country too. I found during my Ph.D. work that it was really difficult sort of creating a network of collaborators in Brazil. And it was really difficult even when I was in the communities, and we had sort of these gateway people who sort of bring you into the community and help you build that level of trust with communities. Um that was – that whole process was so much more difficult in Brazil. And even when I was in the communities in Brazil, people tend to be a little more suspicious of me. Um because I was asking sometimes sensitive questions about sort of informal logging, which is technically illegal, right? So they were convinced that I was coming from the government to ask them questions and I’d tell them, “Listen to my accent, I’m clearly a foreigner,” I’m just a student! But then on the other hand I was doing field work – also doing field work in Mexico for my Ph.D., and that went so smoothly. It just was so easy. Everyone was so incredibly friendly and open from collaborators, to other researchers, to community members, to everything. It was just – even logistically, you know, you could take a bus between cities, and in the Amazon and Brazil I had to take 15 hour boat rides to get places. So it’s just night and day. And – so it’s very dependent on I think who you are working with in that specific country, and I have similar stories in Ghana and Ethiopia about how somethings were made a lot easier just because of the groups that I was collaborating with in those countries. So that’s like, that is basically what determines how much of a challenge logistics are going to be in the end.

**KL:** Well and it sounds like to some degree you can set that up, and in other ways it’s opportunistic or it’s kind of random. Like you just don’t know until you get there and see what’s going to happen. So Reem, how many languages can you speak?

**RH:** Um I – five.

**KL:** Wow okay. What are they? So you mentioned Spanish mentioned Portuguese. Obviously English.

**RH:** Yeah I speak some French and Arabic. Arabic is my native tongue.

**KL:** Okay. That’s a whole different episode to talk with you about that. Maybe we’ll do a little bonus clip on that, because I’m really fascinated about people who speak multiple languages. Okay so -

**RH:** I really just speak English well. The others I can just get by.

**KL:** I’m still very impressed. Okay so I am curious about if you see other kinds of challenges other than the kind of logistical ones you mentioned about conducting research internationally, and one of the ones that kind of immediately comes to mind for me is, what does the IRB say about doing this kind of international research? And to what degree are you providing significant amounts of context of kind of local communities when you are applying to do IRB, and thinking about what does it mean to ask these kinds of questions in these communities? Like you said, some people are skeptical about if you’re coming from the government or something along those lines. Are there challenges along that particular realm of thinking about research internationally? Are there other things that you kind of run into?

**RH:** Yeah. So trust building obviously is a big challenge, but I imagine it would be similar if you’re going to work with rural communities here. If anything, I might get a better reception in Mexico than I do in some places around here depending on what you’re asking questions about and such. In terms of IRB, it has not been that challenging so far in the U.S. So system is a little different, you know, I’m Canadian and I did a lot of my schooling in Canada, and there is an equivalent to the IRB there, so they look for similar things, but also some different things in your applications. Um for the most part the kinds of questions I ask aren’t – don’t get – don’t have automatic red flags with IRB. If you’re talking about sort of illegal activities, yes that could, but you cache it around like anonymity, and confidentiality, and protecting your data and this and that. And you can make a good case for – and if you can make a case for why you are looking at these issues, and why they’re important to study, and who benefits from that then – and that’s sort of how we’ve cached it in our IRB and elsewhere an haven’t had problems with that, so it hasn’t been a huge challenge. Except for I think here they don’t – I can’t remember if they make you translate all of your documents here, at least at the IRB in Canada I would have to have translations of all consents forms, and questionnaires, and this, this, and that and submit that as well to the IRB. But you’re going to end up doing that anyways, so it’s just a matter of getting the paperwork done in time.

**KL:** Okay so I’m also interested – it sounds like you started kind of along this pathway to do more international work relatively early in your education, and that you were doing some kind of international study abroad and like that. For researchers who are thinking of expanding their focus to be more international, and maybe they haven’t had those earlier experiences, you know, what might you recommend for people who at different stages of their career? You know, maybe an n early career researcher or a mid-career researcher who are thinking, “I think this might be the next step in terms of taking m research into a new area.” What are some things that you would recommend for them?

**RH:** I guess I would say contact other researchers who are working in the area. That’s probably the easiest first step. Uh I think that’s what I would do if I were at the moment wanting to work in a brand new contexts. Um see who else is doing work there, see if you can maybe collaborate with them on something, um and build your network. I mean, I think before doing any international work or any work really, at least in the kind of work that I do, it’s all about building a network of collaborators, of people who can sort of act as your gateway to communities. Um that would be – you know, that’s the way to go. You can’t just show up in a country and expect to get things to go anywhere, really, with the research.

**KL:** Well, and I would imaginethat some of this research I also externally funded, um and that you’re seeking grant proposals and things like. What are some of the funding mechanisms that you’re particularly looking at for this kind of work? And I could imagine that this could be kind of a wide range, you know, if you’re coming at it from all of these different angles, and you have these different questions. Can you talk a little bit about that?

**RH:** Uh yeah. I kind of laughed a little bit, because that’s been a bit of a struggle so far. So in the past this work has been – okay so thinking of the work that I was doing in postdoc, the work was funded by NSF, by NASA, DFID – the Department for International Development in the U.K, so the equivalent of USAID. Um when I was in Canada, it was the main social science research council that funded all of the work. So I’ve been going very more traditional routes in that sense, looking for your typical government funding. Um coming here, it has been a bit of a challenge and I’m trying to sort of look for different sources. And I imagine, I just need to figure out where, but I imagine certain foundations might be interested in this kind of work. But it’s also difficult to get that balance between doing various sort of academic research and more practical interventions, which the foundations are really looking for. so at the moment just thinking of the the project – the proposal I’m working on in Borneo, trying to link up with groups that are working on those practical interventions and need some of the researcher – the science aspect to help their work. I’m trying to go that route to see if that works, but I’ll keep you posted. So far it’s been a bit of a struggle here!

**KL:** Well, and I’m really curious about this because I think it’s been useful to hear from people who are struggling a little bit, and be like – I’m curious, what is the path forward? Especially like you’re describing, I’m looking for new things. Like it’s not – and as the funding mechanisms get tighter and tighter, you can’t go back to the same old places. Like it’s just not going to work anymore. What are some strategies that you’re using to explore that? I mean, are you working with other researchers, are you doing internet research? What are some of the ways you’re starting to think about how to get this work funded?

**RH:** Yeah, so I have been staring conversations with people in my college. We have people at the college to help us with these sorts of things. Um and just getting on their radar and like “Hey this is the kind of work I do. If I hear about a foundation or a donor of something that might be interested – let me know.” That hasn’t been too fruitful yet. Um with the government sources, with the NSF type sources, I hear – I mean this happens to everybody, you have to just keep applying a million times and hope that one sticks, right? So that’s definitely still part of the strategy (right). Um and then otherwise I think I’m yeah – just recently looking for more collaborations, you know, everyone is doing this. This search for funding. Some people are working on very similar things to me. I’m trying to sort of reach out to them and let them know, “Hey. I can add this sort of expertise or that expertise if you want to include that in your project.” Just sort of trying to get at it from multiple angles.

**KL:** Well it’s been really fascinating Reem, to hear about the different the different ways that you’re engaging in this research, and the gazillion of questions that you’ve already answered, that you’re trying to answer. I want to thank you so much for taking the time to come into the studio ad talk about it with me today.

**RH:** Oh. Thank you! It’s been fun.

**KL:** Thanks also to our listeners for joining us for this week’s episode of Research in Action. I’m Katie Linder, and we’ll be back next week with a new episode.

# Show notes with links to resources mentioned in the episode, a full transcript, and an instructor guide for incorporating the episode into your courses, can be found at the show’s website at [ecampus.oregonstate.edu/podcast](http://www.ecampus.oregonstate.edu/podcast).

# There are several ways to connect with the “Research in Action” podcast. Visit the website to post a comment about a specific episode, suggest a future guest, or ask a question that could be featured in a future episode. Email us at riapodcast@oregonstate.edu. You can also offer feedback about “Research in Action,” episodes or share research-related resources, by contacting the Research in Action podcast via Twitter @RIA\_podcast. Finally, you can call the Research in Action voicemail line at 541-737-1111 to ask a question or leave a comment. If you listen to the podcast via iTunes, please consider leaving us a review.

# The “Research in Action” podcast is a resource funded by Oregon State University Ecampus, ranked one of the nation’s best providers of online education with more than fifty degree programs and over one thousand classes online. Learn more about Ecampus by visiting ecampus.oregonstate.edu. This podcast is produced by the phenomenal Ecampus Multimedia team.

# “Research in Action” transcripts are sometimes created on a rush deadline and accuracy may vary. Please be aware that the authoritative record of the “Research in Action” podcast is the audio.

# Bonus Clip #1:

**KL:** In this first bonus clip for episode 126 of the Research in Action podcast, Dr. Reem Hajjar discusses how she came to learn five languages. Take a listen:

Reem, during our conversation together, we learned that you know five languages, and this is something that is always really fascinating to me as a person who is like one and a third languages in terms of what I can speak. And I’m – I’m just curious, like, when did you pick up these languages over time? And I know obviously your international work has lead you to do some of this language interaction initiative, but you also don’t learn five languages if you don’t like languages. So can you tell us a little bit about your pathway to leaning five languages?

**RH:** Sure. So I guess the first one was Arabic.So my heritage is Palestinian, my parents obviously both speak Arabic, and I was born in Dubai. And so I learned Arabic first, but I also went to an International school in Dubai, so I spoke English and that quickly became my dominant language. Um we later immigrated to Montreal which is in Quebec, which is French speaking so I had to learn French.

**KL:** What age are we talking here?

**RH:** So that’s age ten.

**KL:** Okay so still relatively young. We always here there’s elasticity in terms of your brain and how you can pick up languages when you’re young. Okay, so you knew two languages up until the age of ten, and then picked of French around that time.

**RH:** Picked up French. You don’t have much choice in Montreal, you have to know French.

**KL:** Yeah picked it up as if it’s no big deal.

**RH:** Well no – I mean, I took it in school as a second language, and I luckily was able to go to an English speaking school and then take it as a second language. A lot of immigrants actually have to go into French school. So I learned French, and then in University I started taking Spanish classes. I think at first because I wanted to know Spanish, and then it turned out that like, “Oh. I want to go do this semester abroad in Panama” so I took an advanced course. So I did a couple years of Spanish at University, and then obviously…

**KL:** Okay so quick question about that. To what degree does knowing three other languages help you to learn a fourth? Especially when French and Spanish, you hear that they’re a little similar in terms of structure.

**RH:** Yeah. Yeah. For sure. I think that definitely helps. Having the French first probably helped the Spanish, and later on having the Spanish definitely helped the Portuguese. Um so yeah.

**KL:** So when did you pick up the Portuguese?

**RH:** So the Portuguese –

**KL:** We shouldn’t say pick it up, because it’s not like you put it in your pocket and all of a sudden you know it.

**RH:** No! And I should say even after two years of university Spanish classes, I did not speak Spanish. It really took living in Panama for four months to solidify that. Um so then Portuguese I picked up while I was doing my Masters. I did my Masters in New York at Columbia, and I TAed in Brazil one summer for a field course. So then I started learning Portuguese and my ex was Brazilian, so I learned more Portuguese that way. And then I end up working in Brazil for my Ph.D., so that definitely picked up – my ability to pick it up improved I guess. So I was going really well with that, but then since then I haven’t really spent that much time in Brazil, and so my Spanish became way more dominant. When I was living in Vancouver – I have a very strong, closely knit group of friends in Vancouver who are mostly Latin American or Spanish, and so I focus much more on the Spanish and I kind of – my Portuguese is petered out a little bit.

**KL:** Mhm. Mhm. So as you’re learning these new languages, what was the most helpful thing? Was it being in a classroom environment where there was more structure? You mentioned going to the country –

**RH:** It was definitely going to country or being surrounded by it constantly. That’s definitely what helped. I feel really comfortable with my Spanish, especially my comprehension. You know, m speaking is maybe a little more limited than my comprehension. I feel completely comfortable listening to all of my Latin American friends speaking Spanish. Um so – and Portuguese since I haven’t been in that context, I just kind of lost it. And French, same thing. I haven’t lived in Montreal since 2002, and so now I struggle with my French. So that’s why I say I may speak five languages, but I really only speak like one well, and then a couple okay, and then you know, a couple are somewhere in the back somewhere.

**KL:** Right, right. Interesting. Well thank you so much for sharing with us a little bit about your language acquisitions.

**RH:** You’re welcome.

**KL:** You’ve just heard a bonus clip from episode 126 of the Research in Action podcast with Dr. Reem Hajjar discussing how she came to learn five languages. Thanks for listening!

# Bonus Clip #2:

**KL:** In this second bonus clip for episode 126 of the Research in Action podcast, Dr. Reem Hajjar describes the difference between extractive and relational research. Take a listen:

Reem, I think especially in an International contexts, but not always in research we can think about it being more extractive or being more relational. And it definitely sounds like you’re trying to be more on the relational side with your research, and building and maintaining relationships in these other countries as you’re kind of strengthen your pipeline. Can you talk a little bit more about that? Kind of the difference between a more extractional mindset versus one that’s a little bit more focused on relationship building.

**RH:** Yeah. So I think of extraction science as being, you know, a scientist flies in, interviews a lot of people or does a survey, you know if they’re doing ecological work- does whatever they need to do, and takes that data and leaves a community, and then doesn’t really come back. Doesn’t share results. So the community is left wondering, “well what just happened? Why do we keep engaging with these people who just come take our knowledge and leave?”

**KL:** Right. It feels very one directional.

**RH:** Yeah! Very much so. And that is something – unfortunately the academic system is, I don’t want to say promotes, but is – it doesn’t discourage in a way given that researcher has certain priorities about publishing and getting grant funding and, da da da. And so a lot of researchers don’t have enough time to put into building long term relationships and practicing non-extractive science. And so non-extractive science would be something where in an ideal situation, you’re working with the community from the beginning to do science that matters to them, and they may be involved in that science, they definitely are receiving the results of that science. So the researcher isn’t just flying in, taking, and leaving, they’re coming in, spending a lot of time doing research that’s relative to the people, and also coming back with the results. And so I can’t claim to say that I am doing that successfully. I strive to do that, but again within the limits of what I’m able to do, it is quite challenging, and working internationally I feel like adds another layer because it’s so expensive to maintain those relationships, right? Keep flying back and – even if you have a limited amount of grant funding to do the research, sometimes you don’t have the money to even go back and deliver those results. And so I’ve tried, and in a couple of places like Mexico, I have gone back to partners and communities that I’ve worked with to give them results, but only after like I did the project, I had the publications, and the results, and such and then I applied for more funding to do a different project and with that funding I was able to go back and deliver the results of the first project. So it’s kind of a delayed process and I think – yeah. Just the fact that you have to fly somewhere to do that makes it more difficult to maintain those relationships. And so I try to do it a different way, you know, keeping in touch with other collaborators and sending them the results and hoping that they’re able to deliver the results to the community, etcetera. Um but so I have this idea that this process would be more – would be simplified or streamlined working in a place where you live, right? So if I were working with communities in Oregon, it would be easier to maintain those relationships. And that’s one of the main things that attracts me to expanding my research program to be more local, is to be able to maintain those relationships more easily.

**KL:** Mhm. Well and I – I guess my question would, how much is technology helping with this? I mean, are you working in communities where email is just not really an option? You know, like can you be keeping things warm using things like those kinds of – you know, Skype calls or whatever it might be, or is that just like, eh, it doesn’t really work?

**RH:** We’re getting there a little bit. I would say mobile phones are a little better, you can at least call people now somewhat reliably, but email not so much, and besides it’s difficult to email results back to people, right? Ideally you’re presenting results in a way that is digestible for people

**KL:** Right. So they can ask questions and…

**RH:** And so ideally, again, they are the process of deciding how they want to receive the results. And so I’ve actually worked with students – I was on a committee of s student back in British Columbia who is doing that. Who’s doing an excellent participatory process of conducting research with indigenous groups in Peru, and she did a great job of maintaining that relationship, and everything was – the people had input to everything. And it was fantastic! It took a very long time for her to complete her project, so in the tradition academic setting, that’s not normally acceptable, right – to spend years and years doing a Masters projects, but that’s what it takes! And so it’s a struggle – who are you trying to appease with this? Who are you serving with this research? I think it’s an important struggle and something that’s really important for people to reflect on when they start approaching community based work.

**KL:** Well thank you for sharing your experience of building and maintaining relationships internationally.

**RH:** You’re very welcome.

**KL:** You’ve just heard a bonus clip from episode 126 of the Research in Action podcast with Dr. Reem Hajjar describing the difference between extractive and relational research. Thanks for listening!