Episode 54: Raul Pacheco-Vega

# KL: Katie Linder

# RP: Raul Pacheco-Vega KL: You’re listening to *Research in Action*: episode fifty-four.

# [intro music]

# Segment 1:

# KL: Welcome to *Research in Action*, a weekly podcast where you can hear about topics and issues related to research in higher education from experts across a range of disciplines. I’m your host, Dr. Katie Linder, director of research at Oregon State University Ecampus. Along with every episode, we post show notes with links to every resources mentioned in the episode. Full transcript and an instructor guide for incorporating the episode into your courses. Check out the shows website at Ecampus.oregonstate.edu/podcast to find all of these resources.

On this episode, I am joined by Dr. Raul Pacheco-Vega an assistant professor in the public administration division of the center for economic teaching and research in Mexico. He is a specialist in comparative public policy and focuses on North American environmental politics. Primarily sanitation and water governance, solid waste management, neo institutional theory, transnational environmental social movements and experimental methods in public policy. His current research program focus on the spatial, political, and human dimensions of public service delivery. He is also an associate editor of journal of the environmental studies and sciences and sits on the editorial board of water international global environmental politics and several other journals. He is the creator of the weekly hash tag #scholar Sunday on twitter.

Welcome to the show Raul.

**RP:** Thank You, Thank You Katie.

**KL:** So I thought we could start out by talking a little bit about your current research which focuses on the global politics of sanitations. I’m curious what you mean by that can you explain a little bit about what that means to you.

**RP:** So I am chemical engineer in training and I have a master degree in chemical, environmental change and my PhDs I am a double PhD in human geography and Environmental policy. And for decades I have been interested in understanding ways in which we can cooperatively and collaboratively clean up our environment. I think there is huge issues with having basically not enough interest in waste water. I belong to an international network of social science research of water and I was appalled to find that nobody studied waste water. Everybody was interested in cultural water and water access and ground water and urban water and nobody was looking at waste water. And I started thinking well the thing is if you about water as a global cycle and like the hydrological global what happens when we only look at one side of the equation at water itself rather than including water and waste water. I started looking at the governments of waste water in Mexico and I looked at the way in which they find stakes within the basin the Lerma-Chapala River basin and then as I did more research I found there was huge issues with sanitation all over the world. More than a billion people don’t have the dignity of a toilet and you would be surprise in that in Canada Vancouver B.C. my hometown, there are people who defecate in the open. There are people who defecate in the open in downtown Vancouver which is one of the most livable cities worldwide. This is a puzzle to me, understanding the politics of sanitation in different countries why is it working in some places but it doesn’t in others right. Why is it that India and some African countries like Ghana and Ethiopia have such huge levels of open defecation? Why do people still defecate in the open rather than use toilets even in the places like India when they do have the toilets. That is the question that has puzzled me the last 15 years of my life.

**KL:** So, I would imagine that this has like an incredible amount of layers and that it’s crossing disciplines, you’re pulling in probably lots of different kinds of information, let’s talk a little about the data you’re looking at. You know, what are you collecting, and what kinds of questions are you asking? You kinda, you dove into that a little bit, but I’m just curious, are there boundaries to this, because it seems like there’s just a huge range of things that could potentially impact this issue.

**RP:** I’m an interdisciplinary scholar so I can look at the quantitative data on sanitation. I don’t have a degree in public health, but I understand sanitation as a public health issue because I’ve read the literature and I’m well-versed in the literature. Most of the interventions that have been done on sanitation look at why do people adopt sanitation practices or not? They are using randomized control trials. Now the ethical component to that is that it would be sort of, you know if the intervention is whether they have or not access to a toilet, I think that’s huge, it’s horrible how you can deny someone from using the toilet, so what people end up doing is what’s called a randomized appointment. So everyone gets the intervention, they get them at a different status in the experimentation. I’ve been doing a lot of work on field experiments, but the kind of data that I look at both are social, so I interview people, I ask them why or why do they not use toilets, what kind of access or denial of access they face, what kind of insecurities they face. But also, I look at the quantitative data on toilet access or wastewater treatment decrease and so on, because sometimes, even with having wastewater treatment plants, it doesn’t solve the sanitation problem, right? There’s the wastewater treatment plants issue, there’s the wastewater treating, treating wastewater as one problem, then there’s the having access to a toilet is another problem, and all of these problems are interrelated, and all of them are political. In fact, the prime minister of India actually won the election on, being elected on a platform of global access to toilets.

**KL:** Oh wow.

**RP:** So toilets are political and denial of access to a toilet is as political a statement as you can. It’s literally what Foucault called the biocontrol, the biopolitics of the toilet. It’s controlling the human body to a point where you can use their basic form of necessity. People are like the basic necessity of life is to eat, and I’m like no, you can last two days without eating, I can tell you if you spend two days with no excretion, you will have huge, huge problems, you will die. So denying someone to the most basic human right there is, which is the right to relieve yourself in the human ways you generate it is tremendously political. And I think one of the reasons that this research is not as interesting for scholars is, we talk about [bleep sound] right? We talk about human waste. You know water, clean water is being used to move human waste and to remove, so what we end up seeing is what Jamie Benedictson calls the culture of brushing, people don’t want to see [bleep sound]. People don’t want to see what happens when you go to the bathroom. People want to flush the toilet, they think that when they flush they can forget about anything that happens and there are political things that happen with that water right? Like you could use that water to irrigate agricultural land or you can deny people the right to use that for irrigation, so there’s a lot a lot of things that I don’t think have been well thought out when they look at water. So that’s why I find it fascinating, it’s immediately fascinating to me to see how having access to a toilet, how having access to a wastewater treatment plant becomes a political issue. That’s the kind of questions that I ask. So I ask questions to the people that are the most affected, but I also ask questions of the people who are supposed to be providing you with the service, like government officials and so on. So why are they not interested in providing better wastewater treatment access? Why are we so focused and bent on water access but not wastewater treatment and not access to toilets? It’s the worst form of insecurity.

**KL:** Well I have to say, we’ve talked about a lot of fascinating things on this show, and this is one of those areas where I think I don’t have any knowledge and I am fascinated. You’re raising all these interesting questions and issues. You mentioned some exploration you’re doing of this in other countries, and so I’m wondering if your research involves international collaboration and if so, what does that look like? Or are you looking at data that’s already been collected, or are you working with other researchers in other countries?

**RP:** Yeah, well so right now I have collaborations in other countries for my project on bottled water, but not sanitation. I’m an ethnographer, right? I like looking at data and people, and somehow, I find that I do the ethnographic side, it’s easier for me to understand. So it’s harder for me to feel in collaboration with someone else when they have their own lenses to examine the data. It’s easier for me for bottled water, because bottled water is much sort of global phenomenon, but even though sanitation is a global phenomenon, it has such specific and unique conditions in each country that it’s important to me to be there and experience the lack of access that these people have in person. That said, I’m starting to collaborate with colleagues to look at the politics of sanitation in African countries and I’m looking possibly at Ethiopia and also in India. I have two colleagues that are interested in this sort of collaborative and comparative work. Now when I look at field work, I normally do field work in North America, that’s my specialty, but because this issue is so global, this is where I need to engage in cross national collaborations, that’s for sure.

**KL:** Mhm, mhm, well I find this so interesting, I’m excited to dig in a little bit more. We’re going to take a brief break, when we come back we’ll hear a little bit more from Raul. Back in a moment.

[*music plays*]

# Segment 2:

**KL:** Raul, one of the interesting things to me about your work is that you’re so actively engaged in the research community. You’re an associate editor for a journal, you’re on several editorial boards, and you’re so incredibly active on social media where I ran across you, and also how many people recommended to me that you come on this show. I’m wondering if you can talk a little bit about the start of how you came into those areas and how they built up over time; how are you choosing which kinds of opportunities to engage with, and how are they contributing to your larger research identity?

**RP:** So, I’ll talk, I think those are two related, but separate elements. So the first one is, I’m who I am and I was mentored as I was growing up as a researcher by the great Elinor Ostrom, the only woman to win a Nobel Prize in Economics, and her late husband Vincent Ostrom, and they were two of the biggest thinkers in the [*inaudible*] governances of resources. And so when I made the Ostroms, they basically taught me how to be a good scholar but also how to be a good person and a good citizen of my discipline. So I figured well, if I am who I am because of the contributions that other scholars have done for me and to my own research agenda, I figured I should also contribute back. So I try to give back as much as I can, and one of them is sitting on editorial boards, I’m also a I’m part of the Long Range Climbing Committee for the International Studies Association, and I’m the chair of this proud award for the best book in global environmental governments, for ISA as well for the environmental section, and I also participate in committees with the [*inaudible]* American Association, and I’m on the information technology advisory board for the Western Political Science Association. I mean I am very engaged with the associations that I work with. But I’m also an associate editor for the Journal of Environmental Studies and Sciences and that’s also one way in which I contribute because I try to teach young scholars how to write better, how to polish better, how to do interdisciplinary research through my mentoring as I am an associate editor, I also write about it on my blog, I blog about scholarly research and scholarly communication. And more than anything, I’m really interested in building a more humane and human community and the best way to do that is by building networks, and I’m really good at building networks. I remember, as a grad student I would email scholars out of the blue and say, this is before social media. And I would say, “Hi”, you know, “my name I Raul, I’m a Ph.D. student, and I love your research, I’d love to sit down with you and talk.” So one of the reasons that I am so strongly connected with the Canadian political science community and the Canadian human geography community is that I basically knew them all in person before social media. I now have a lot of really good friends or professors who were my colleagues in grad school and who are now professors in different universities all over the world. And we can now connect on Twitter and on Facebook, and it’s amazing because you get to see, on Facebook for example, my Facebook is very private, my personal Facebook, I also have a public page, my professional page. But it’s amazing to see colleagues of mine who are academics, who are, you can see this personal side of them, you know with their kids, and for example I post on my Instagram, I post photos of where I’m going for dinner. And people tell me, how the hell do you have an active research agenda and manage to have a life? And I’m like well I’m very organized, and so I have a very large network of scholars. That also led to creating the hashtag of #scholarsunday on Twitter. I decided that I needed that as to create a mechanism in through which people could promote other scholars. Academia so much sometimes about promoting oneself that scholars have that give people opportunity to promote other scholars. I see sometimes the hashtag not being used the way I actually created it, but I let it go because I think it is a great way to communicate with people, they actually learn to look for each other by following new scholars and by knowing what they do and by seeing what they do. So for me, Twitter, Facebook, even Instagram, which is very personal, is a great tool in which to advance for researchers. Some of my best friends and colleagues now I have found through Twitter, I bumped into Orio Mirosa from University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, I’m working with him on the human right to water, we met on Twitter, and we’re now excellent friends and we’ve gone to dinner, we’ve done free contests together in the past 18 months and we’ve spent literally weeks together so. I met Staci Zavattaro from the University of Central Florida also on Twitter and we went to Sweden and we went to Denmark together and we traveled together and we’re also doing a paper together. Social media has been amazing for my research agenda not only in terms of how visible we’ve become, but also how many networks and how many people access me and how many people I access. I mean as someone who has benefitted so much from mentorship, for me it is important to mentor other people and I try to do that online through my blog and through my Twitter and so on. Ph.D. students, adjuncts, no tenure/tenured faculty, adjacent to this, just about anybody if they give me enough notice, just about anybody has access to me. And this comes to the question to ask, how do I make decisions on which opportunities to engage more? You know service to my research, to my community, to my university and so on. It is very rare that I say no to a request from a grad student from an undergrad student, from an adjunct faculty, from an untenured track contingent faculty from adjacent to the media, I mean people who are more vulnerable, tend to be the ones that I ask, that when they ask me I always say yes. Queer students for example, I am queer, I’m open to queers, so if they come to me and approach me and say, “Professor how do you deal with being openly queer in academia?” I usually make the time. I mean I’ve made the time to talk to people when I’m doing field work in Madrid, at 3:00 in the morning because they need advice on how to come out to their parents. So I mean to me, the more vulnerable or the more marginalized the person is, the more likelihood that I’ll be saying yes because I think being a professor where I am and having the kind of skills and networks that I have, it’s a kind of privilege I can’t deny and I need to make sure I use my privilege to help the marginalized.

**KL:** So speaking of working with people who are a little more vulnerable, I’m curious to what recommendations you have for people who are just starting out, maybe they’re not sure how to become actively engaged, but maybe they want to expand their networks or become more engaged on social media. Do you have tips or strategies for those people to start their engagement and start to build that up for themselves?

**RP:** I think that engagement needs to be very, very cautious. You need to see what exactly you can and cannot do. It’s perfectly fine not to engage because you may be in a vulnerable position. If you are in a vulnerable position and you want to contribute to your society as well by engaging in this kind of work, I think reaching out to people asking for mentorship. That’s perfectly fine. There is nothing wrong with asking for help, absolutely nothing wrong with asking for help. So, I think that’s what I would do. I would ask people to see if they could help me find my niche and my voice. I think voices are very important and I think it’s underrated how important they are. But as a scholar, finding your voice is important. I think finding your voice helps you contribute which is also important.

**KL:** Thank you for sharing some of your experiences. I think starting out with mentorship is obviously – it’s been so impactful for you, it’s been impactful for me as well, so that’s a great tip for our listeners. We’re going to take another brief break. When we come back, we’ll hear a little more from Raul. Back in a moment.

# Segment 3:

**KL:** Raul, one of the areas of your research that’s really interesting to me is that you are working with some pretty vulnerable communities. And I know that you have some thoughts about this in terms of maybe responsibilities of the researcher or cautions to think about when you’re working with these communities. Can you talk a little bit more about that? What are some of the communities that you’re working with that you feel are especially vulnerable and what are some things you think researchers need to take into account where they’re doing that kind of work?

**RP:** Thank you. Yes, Katie. So I’m-I’m working with Dr. Kate Parizeau from University of [inaudible] and she’s done work on informal waste pickers speakers in Argentina, in Buenos Aires. And I’ve done the same kind of work with informal waste speakers in Mexico. I have several different countries, I have eight countries in my research agenda and waste pickers speakers are people, normally very poor people, who pick the trash that you leave outside your door or that is in a land field and then they separate that from other types of trash, and then they sell it to their recyclers, large scale recyclers, who then pay them. Now, these are very vulnerable communities for the most part, and it’s amazing how little spots have been included into how we deal with those vulnerable communities. So Kate and I have been working on ways in which we can empower those communities and I think the most important question that we keep looking at is not only the question of you know, having access to that but also not extracting from them, right? Like, so they give us great insight into-informal recyclers give us great insight into informality and the governments of informality and why does-why do people engage in informal work that brings them income that is unlike survival income. Now, when people ask me why am I interested in waste speakers even that they look at ways but what why I am I so interested in their wellbeing, I will have to openly come out of the closet and disclose that my goal is to bridge the gap between, narrow the gap, between the rich and the poor and empower those at the margins. So I do that by studying phenomena, where the populations that I study are very vulnerable, but the way which I lead my research is very actively engaged research. So my research is not only there to be published in the Journal of Economic Geography or the American Political Science Review or you know, any books, no. My research is there to be used by policy makers and be used in an engaged manner, so I study waste speakers because I believe that they hold the key in very some way which local governments can’t work with waste speakers, they hold a key to a [inaudible] circle where the waste we create a human and the solid waste that we create humans and some people recycle and realized this cycle becomes close. And now remember, I think as an engineer, the social science that I apply to this is social science from an interdisciplinary engineering prospective. Where I think of how to make waste speakers part of the processing system, but at the same time, the social part of the social science research also ensure that when I interview waste pickers, that when I present them on my research, that I don’t extract from them, that I respect their vulnerability, that I protect their privacy, their immunity and that I find ways to make their living better so if my research can do that, then it’s active engaged research. So to do this reengaged research is valuable, so Kate and I have been working on models to really engage the scholars in this sub reflection, in this, talking to yourself thinking, how can I deal with a community that is vulnerable without extracting, without trying to misrepresent them, by providing, actually insights, that can improve their wealth.

**KL:** So one of the aspects of your research – I mean it sounds like you’re thinking very deeply about methodology and I’m wondering if this is something that you’re publishing on, I mean clearly it’s something you’re discussing with other researchers. What role is that playing on your research and your pipeline to kind of do those meta-level thinking about the methods you’re engaging in?

**RP:** So yes, normally am I doing this thinking and I’m also publishing a couple pieces with Kate as well, but it’s interesting because I love methods, I love research methods, but I somehow didn’t think of myself as an methodologist. I always thought, you know, do very applied research but don’t think I’m an methodologist. But because I’ve been doing this kind of reflections, I’ve been moving towards creating better methods and more engaged methods for scholarly research. Because I don’t think we could just rely – I, I would get bored to tears if I have to stay in my cubical and, and not think about the reality of the populations I work with. So what I’m publishing now, I have a couple of pieces that in the pipeline, in the research methods journals, and I think the next stage of my research is going to be organizing a small workshop or conference of research methods in vulnerable communities. I have a couple of colleagues in addition to Kate Perizeau, so for example Kate O’Neill for the University of California, Berkley, and she [inaudible] from British Columbia and Airel and myself are also from the University of Wisconsin-Milwauke and myself are thinking about vulnerable communities in each one of our areas and maybe we’ll try to look at some journals where we can publish some there some extra journals, some research methods. Field Methods is one of the best journals but I really, really enjoy that journal. One of my good friends, Amber – Dr. Amber Wutich who teach from Arizona State University, is an associate editor of Field Methods and I think it’s time that we start getting you know, our money where our mouth is, right? Like we need to do research that is not only insightful but that also has practical possible modifications for the populations we’re studying.

**KL:** So it’s interesting to hear you talk about kind of these networks that you’re building of people asking similar questions, you can bounce ideas off of each other, co-publish together. For researchers who are kind of just starting out, this goes back a little bit to an early question, but I’m wondering, you know – you are clearly skilled at building your networks and connecting with people at different institutions, I’m wondering if there’s just some kind of little logistical tips you can give to people. I mean is it about people you meet on social media, is it about people you’re citing in your work. You know, how are you building these relationships that are growing and that allowing you then to you know, meet them face to face at conferences, co-publish, all those kinds of things.

**RP:** So I do all of those and I think – I know conferences are expensive and I definitely understand that. I know that, you know, sending your pays for conferences is really, really tough, but I would very much encourage students and early-in-career researchers to participate in at least one major conferences per year. But also you know people before, follow them on Twitter, talk to them. I mean, I have breaks with Dusty Garret from Oxford with [inaudible] from Portland University and we met on Twitter and we said, “Let’s organize a panel at a conference” and they did and it was fantastic and we went for dinner. So it’s funny because a lot of people think that I do – because I travel to so many conferences, people think that do academic tourism. And I’m like “no, I do academic tourism” but of course I’m going to have friends who are academics and academics are humans and I like having humans as friends. You know, that’s how I deal with my relationships, so just making the face-to-face contact is invaluable, I think it’s very much worth looking at for sure.

**KL:** One of the things that I was thinking about recently and doing recently – when I travel to conferences, as I try to look at the program a couple weeks in advance and email the people I might want to meet with while I’m there, whether I know them or not, to say “hey, is your dance card full? Could we schedule a coffee or could we schedule a breakfast?” And I feel like that is something we don’t always take the time to do, but can be really impactful if we can find a moment to kind of look at those things ahead of time and try and meet up with people to get that one on one time – it can really be a helpful thing.

**RP:** It really – the dance card is great. At some point in the anecdote there’s this current University of Massachusetts Amherst, [*inaudible*], she’s a professor there. And I said last year, I said at the international student conference, tackle with me when necessary. I’m on my iPhone, but if you see me talk to me! If you follow me on Twitter and so on, just stop me in my tracks. And a lot of people did. Paul Dida, I think he said, “well he just seems busy.” I’m busy, I’m at a conference, but I mean I love talking to people. I study cooperation for crying at loud. [*laughs*] It would be a little bit dumb if I refused to talk to people at conferences. I am someone who prides on building networks and on understanding networks. So to me, it’s really important that people feel comfortable and confident to reach out to me. I know that I’m imposing in some ways because a lot of people are afraid to reach out to me and I know that and it’s funny, but I don’t think they should. I think there is – I mean I love mentoring people. If anything I can say or teach or tell people can help there own research agendas and their growth, I’m always there. I’m now on the LGBT caucus for ASA and I’m trying to get the LGBT caucus also for APSA, for the American Political Science Association. I’m trying to contribute as much as I can to my teaching plane and also my own community. Being queer Latino is a big challenge, particularly now in the United States for example. So I try and help as much as I can, and that’s part of what I think needs to be done at conferences. Just reach out, trust me, people will say yes a lot more than you think.

**KL:** I completely agree. I’m so inspired by your research, Raul, and your experiences that you’ve shared with us today. Thanks so much for taking the time to come on the show!

**RP:** No problem, I’m very, very happy that you invited me Katie.

**KL:** And 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.

[end of episode]

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# Bonus Clip:

**KL**: In this bonus clip for Episode 54 for the *Research in Action* podcast, Dr. Raul Pacheco-Vega shares about his work to advance global environmental governance. Take a Listen.

So I know that one of the things that’s kind of a mission for you for your research is to advance understanding of global environmental governance, and that seems like a big term. I’m wondering if we can unpack that, but then if you can talk a little bit about how your research does that.

**RP:** I’m interested in advancing global environmental governance in many ways. But one of them is trying to help understand how global forces have local impacts and how, local process phenomena have global consequences. So for example, when I look at the flows of money that the bottled water industry engages in, it’s a global international political economy kind of question right? What happens when there are trans-national corporations that have an interest in how money is being – you know, how to make money out of bottling a human right. It’s the same with sanitation, right? In sanitation what happens at the local level – the practices that people engage in when they do not have access to a toilet also has global consequences because the burden of disease increases. If you have a lot of open defecation, what you’ll end up having is a lot of diseases. Also, if you irrigate water and you do not sanitize for pathogens, you’ll have a huge global burden of disease. So, what you end up having is these are very complex networks of relationships between what happens in regards to how we manage water, solid waste, and with water at the local level, and how not to get properly have global implications. So that’s my contribution to global environmental governance. Now, there are all sediments of global environmental governance that I look at from a comparative perspective. So, I speak five languages, almost six if you count Japanese. So I look at different countries and how those countries operate. Doing those comparisons across countries, I also contribute to a better understanding because I have cases in Japan, I have cases in Spain, I have cases now in Africa, in other countries. So, the effect of my research is so global and somewhat encompassing also has implications for how implications for how I contribute. I may contribute from a comparative perspective, but many of the insights I gain, have global consequences and therefore can be used in global environmental governance.

[end of clip]

**KL:** You’ve just heard a bonus clip from Episode 54 of the *Research in Action* podcast with Dr. Raul Pacheco-Vega sharing about his work to advance global environmental governance. Thanks for listening!