15. Shouldnâ€™t we be Qualified ...proach with Dr. Kristen Cheney

Wed, Oct 25, 2023 3:32PM 1:10:34

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

orphanage, children, orphan, family, care, people, system, part, uganda, support, child protection, kids, volunteers, community, places, money, kinds, home, narrative, institution

SPEAKERS

Lauren Pinkston, Dr. Kristen Cheney

L Lauren Pinkston 00:05

Today, we are in for a treat. I hate to say that we're in for a treat because this is a heavy topic and it's really a topic that motivated the entire start to this curated season on Reforming Orphan Care. And so I'm thrilled to be joined by Professor Kristen Cheney. She is well known in this space. Her name came up multiple times as I was reaching out to experts and and I'm thrilled to get to introduce you guys to her voice and to her work. In really minimizing the effects of tragic practices and orphan tourism, orphanage tourism, and intercountry adoption. So I just welcome everyone to maybe pause and have an open mind about this conversation. I'm sure that some stories will come out from this conversation too that push up against some things that the church and people of faith have often just received as good and not really questioned. So Kristen, thank you so much for your time today and what else would you add in? We'll share your bio online, but what else would you like to add in to kind of paint the picture and lay a foundation for who we're talking with today?

D Dr. Kristen Cheney 01:23

Thank you, Lauren. Thanks for inviting me. I think for me, what's really important is thinking about some of these things along a continuum and so that's what I've tried to do with talking about what I call the "orphan industrial complex". There are a lot of different practices that may not be defined as trafficking or illegal or even illicit or unethical, but that really contributes sometimes to very unintended consequences for child protection that might seem very innocuous at the time. So I talked about everything from, you know, even putting some coins in a jar where they're raising money for orphanages abroad, all the way up to things like illicit and illegal adoption, which I think is a field that gets very tricky very fast, because we have very prevalent narratives and all these instances about orphans that are very romanticized. It's never a bad thing to help an orphan. And yet we've seen the deleterious consequences of that and child protection around the world. And so part of the point that I try to make is that, you know, when you do things pour money into orphanages, which we have already 67 years of developmental psychology research that shows that orphanages are not good places for

children to grow up, preferably, when their families are safe. It's better for children to grow up in a family or a family like environment. So we're contributing not only to really detrimental effects on the well-being of individual children, but as communities and families also, because often children are in orphanages only to seek services or get access to resources that they might not otherwise have in the community. And I find a lot of times even though people can be very generous. I talked to a friend who had an orphanage for a long time until she figured out that wasn't the way to go, and she said, "When I had an orphanage, I had no trouble raising money. But when we shifted to family based care and really started building a good kind of foster system, or kinship based care and just supporting relatives to take care of children..." Which where I work in Africa is actually a very strong system, right? That when something happens to someone, their brother or sister or someone else in their family takes in their children as if they're their own one. So that's actually a much better environment for children to grow up in. But of course, part of my work, I also talk about how things like the HIV AIDS epidemic strained that system, and yet it didn't, I mean, there was some debates around did it strain it to the breaking point and actually my argument is because the international community made a very conscious effort to support existing community based systems rather than ramping up institutionalization, for example. We sort of weathered the orphan crisis. And so I get a little agitated when people still talk about there being an orphan crisis because I say we don't have an orphan crisis, particularly in places like Africa, where we like to think, oh, there's all these orphans, we need to go and help. But actually, I would say what we have is a child protection crisis, because the way not to help them is to start pouring a bunch of money into founding and establishing and supporting and doing mission trips to orphanages. So I think that's the sort of nutshell message I tried to send out there, which you know, is hard to hear sometimes because it does go against that general narrative of this helps children, but I can get into some of the particulars of why that's not the case. But not only does it jeopardize those children and communities, but actually even national child protection efforts and international child protection efforts. I have testified before the Dutch parliament for example, and said the problem is not that the wheel doesn't exist in some of these places, but that a lot of times, you know, children's services, women and children's services often lump together and they're not very well funded. And so they're out money-ed by people coming to help. And when they help in the wrong ways, it actually undermines the robustness of the system they're trying to do to protect children, even things like international adoption, which there's a lot of money in it and so that can really tend to muck up the field right and get in the way of what is the best interest of the child. And so those are things that I tried to stress when I talk about this issue.

L Lauren Pinkston 06:00

And really what's in the best interest of the child is what we have to center and this entire narrative, right? I know that you take a human rights approach, but the human rights of children are huge and critical, and can so often be spoken over by people who are well intentioned. And to have the money to fund what they believe is in the right interest of the child without ever centering the voice of of children. So especially with adult children who have come out of maybe a orphanage-type system, if we want to use that language, but an institutionalized care system, what have you heard and learned from adult adoptees or adults children that had that experience growing up?

D Dr. Kristen Cheney 07:12

It depends on context to some extent, but I've had students who grew up in care who did their

their theses on the topic. And in fact, I've co-authored with some of them at some points. I actually I can think of one year where I had two students, one from one country and one from another, and one was in a private orphanage, and one was in actually in a children's village. And so they had very different sorts of experiences there. But I think part of what came out of their research in the end too was, so they were talking to other people who had experience of care on people and I think a lot of what was striking about what came out of their their studies were that there was an overwhelming sense of, in retrospect, exploitation that they felt that they had been used by the institution that was was really their home, was really what was the place that they were supposed to be taken care of. And so sometimes that didn't emerge until they were older and then left and they they lost that support system. They were sort of pushed out to the orphanage because they were too old and they were too, you know, they weren't cute and cuddly anymore and so they weren't profitable in some in some ways. But I will never forget a blog that one of my students wrote, where he talked about the fact that they would line them up when they were having visitors. They would bathe them all, but they wouldn't put shoes on their feet because they had to look poor enough. And so when these potential donors came, they were told to sing and dance and act very excited to play the role that these volunteers were expecting of orphans. And so he talked a bit about that. He talked about how, in particular children with disabilities would be paraded in front of donors who are interested in funding projects around disability. So there was a whole performance that was really put on around what people's supposedly charitable interests were. So it wasn't just them that was being sort of exploited. It was of course, the people who are coming to give, right? But he also said sometimes they get excited because volunteers would come and they might get out of the orphanage and it might be one of the only few times a year where they would actually be able to leave the compound the wall compound where they live. One time they went to the zoo and these volunteers had come and taken them to the zoo and he said I remember sitting there looking at the giraffes and the enclosure and thinking how much more free they are than I am in the orphanage. So stories like this are just really heart rending because I think the intent was always that we were helping these children and we're doing something good to them. He also remembered that when he was maybe five or six, these volunteers would come and pay a lot of attention to him but when he got older, they were they were not so interested. They wanted to play with the younger kids, they wanted to hug and cuddle and take pictures of themselves doing that and putting their pictures on social media and all these sorts of things. And then you know, as a 9, 10, 12 year old, he felt really neglected, right? So it's experiences like these that really stick with me, but the the ultimate thing was that some of them felt that, in the end, especially where, say the children's village, this other student of mine said they were encouraged and scripted to write letters to their sponsors. So even things like child sponsorship, we really have to approach very carefully because they would do this they would be told to ask for certain things from sponsors that they wouldn't get, right? It will come to the institution. It won't come to them as the individual children. But they will be asked to do things like that. And he said in one of his focus groups with young people who had left care, they recall that one in one of their homes (and I've used that word very loosely because I don't really think that those kinds of Children's Villages reproduce a home environment) they had a child who was HIV positive, and everybody knew it. And they were jealous of that child because they said, "You're sitting on gold because you can raise so much more money than we can because you have HIV." And it's just it's mind blowing to think that. They thought later, like, how messed up is that we, as kids, were jealous of this kid who had a terminal disease because they were able to raise so much more money from their sponsors than we were able to raise. But also the fact that they have raised that kind of money, as you know, 8, 9, 10 year olds for this institution that they never saw and that they felt like hadn't benefited them when they were sort of forced out of the institution as 18 or 19 year olds, and then they were really trying to get some support because they had been isolated from the world. So they didn't even have things like

social networks, let alone the material advantages that they had gotten used to being particularly in a foreign sponsored institution in the global south. So those are things that really stick out to me immediately when you ask that question.

L Lauren Pinkston 12:24

It's interesting, those are the same types of narratives that that I have heard almost verbatim in multiple, multiple settings, especially in on the continent of Africa. And I'm just wondering how this shared experience of maybe the children in care or in adults who have gone over as volunteers or maybe stories that listeners or have heard from people who volunteered or went to tour an orphanage? How that has perpetuated a narrative of the continent itself, and also of just maybe misunderstanding how communities are structured? You alluded to this in the beginning of this recording, but I'd love to go deeply into what you just shared in passing. I think is critical, because it's something we've misunderstood about the way community is done in the Global South. It's so connected, and it's so familial in its nature and so even just introducing and an institutionalized model of care to a community that has traditionally been so good at taking care of itself and one another, how do you parse that out in your mind and how would you help people who are listening understand the layers there?

D Dr. Kristen Cheney 14:23

Well, one of the books I wrote, Crying For Our Elders, is about orphanhood in the age of HIV and AIDS in Africa. And so I talk a little about the broader trajectory, but I was trained as an anthropologist and so I did an ethnography basically of this phenomenon. And so I worked in a community with a group of children who were without parental care. And I say that now because I think the term "orphan" has been such a misnomer and so misused in so many ways and maybe is part of the source of the problem. So in working in that community, I never really visited an orphanage until the end of two years of fieldwork where I thought maybe I should because this is a thing that we have to reckon with. And actually, that's what got me down the rabbit hole of a lot of these other topics because I was really looking at community based orphan care until I figured out that there was an alarming proliferation of orphanages, particularly in Uganda, where I was doing this field work at that time. And so part of what I've done is backup or zoom out of that to talk about this orphan industrial complex on a broader scale because it is global. There are estimates that around 95% of the orphanages that we're seeing proliferate or have seen proliferate in the last decade or so in Uganda have been foreign-funded, and primarily faith based foreign-funded. So that's part of where the problematic comes in But in terms of just what I was seeing when I was sitting with these communities... I go and meet grandmothers and aunties, and I mean, it's largely women doing this work. There are people who have said you were neglecting people like grandfathers who are also there. They are aunties and uncles, there are grandfathers and grandmothers doing this kind of care at the time. What I asked them was, I said, "Well, in the local language, what is the term that you use to describe orphans?" It was a very interesting reaction because they would often sort of look around to be sure that children weren't within earshot and they would say, "Well, that's not really the same as orphan in English Like, it is a child who has no body and, you know, they have us so they don't really have no body." So it's not quite the same thing. It's not like a "social orphan" or the kinds of terms we would use. So I really go a bit in the book into sort of the etymology of orphanhood and the kinds of terms that are used in international parlance like orphans and vulnerable children or "OVC", double orphans, single

orphans, what all that means. But actually how that translates into a very local situation like this is very complex. They would talk about the fact that they don't have orphans in the same sense. However, when donors show up and say, "Where are your orphans", the same children they didn't want to hear being referred to in these terms, that might mean that you know, they're kind of pitied or pitiable, suddenly it's like, "Here are all my orphans." You might have sponsorship for education, you might have stuff for orphans. And in fact, I talked to someone who was the head of the OVC programs for UNICEF at the time and she was saying that we would have these events where we would give stuff to orphans and she said one time she actually heard these kids over on the sidelines behind her saying, "I wish my parents were dead so I could get all free schoolbooks." Like, what are we doing that we're making children actually wish their parents were dead, so they could get free stuff?! So it's really about looking at the politics of targeting, whether it's in charitable work or international development, and how that actually creates these adverse effects to where it sort of interrupts this whole ethos in the community. When something happens to someone in my family, and of course HIV AIDS had a devastating effect on people of childbearing age, typically, people would start to show signs of illness right around that time when they had small children. That's part of what I talk about that development in the book too - of how the prevention of mother to child transmission came in places ,starting really in places like Uganda. And that prevented a lot of children from being born with HIV, but it didn't necessarily save their parents from from suffering from it and dying from it while those children were very young. And so part of these responses were about how do we care for the coming sort of orphan crisis, right? So that's part of why I say that a lot of that was weathered because there was some recognition on the international level of the UNICEF and the World Health Organizations and these large international NGOs to deal with that problem. But largely, because there was that existing social safety net, and so they're like, we just need to support the aunties and uncles, the grandmas and grandpas who are doing this and I met grandmothers who had 14 or 15 kids in their home that were not their own children, but they were maybe grandchildren, nieces, nephews like that. And even though they didn't have material wealth, those kids were better off right than they would have been and I think that's part of where we get into this sort of mismatch is this notion of that somehow this the material is paramount in care, because, yes, you have to have access to some of those basics to food and medicine and education is a big one for a lot of a lot of families in this area. That access to education might be a real driving factor, but it's part of why, when you set up an orphanage in a poor community, often they will come, but if they don't come, which we find as well in places like Uganda, what they do is often send out what we call "child finders" to say, "Look over there - free school!" They're not they're not marketing it locally as an orphanage. But they're saying it's free access to education. There was actually a baseline study that some of my colleagues did a little less than a decade ago, maybe eight years ago, and they looked at why children were in orphanages in places like Uganda, and the presumption is that it's because they've lost their parents. Even then, as I pointed out, that doesn't make that child an orphan in local parlance, right? That that doesn't mean they have no one because they have a notion of extended family obligation and responsibility. And so even those children who have lost both their parents to AIDS, or what whatever it may be- a car accident - doesn't matter, your family takes you in, right? So that was strain, certainly, under the the AIDS epidemic, but it wasn't broken. Especially where there were entitlements that were given to those grandmothers, those aunties, and so on, the people who are really taking care of those children at the household level, they really helped to alleviate what could have been a real orphan crisis, a crisis of care in terms of children being on the streets or without without parental care. So I think that those are important lessons for us that if you don't know about them, you might still think soemthing like starting an orphanage is an appropriate response. But actually, it interrupts that kind of system, right? And it really undermines it because then people are much more likely to give their money to an orphanage that costs a lot more to run, frankly, and also

is not good for children to be in an institutional setting, particularly young children. And I don't know if you or your listeners might know about this, but it's to the extent that UNICEF quite some years ago, put out a call to action that said children under three should never be in an orphanage for more than three months. And that's because for every three months there is institutional care, they actually lose one month developmentally. So they go backwards in their development. And so they say get them out of that that environment and get them into a family-like setting and whether that's training good foster families, whether that's putting them in kinship care with a you know with a with a relative, but get them out of an institutional setting because it has detrimental effects on their development. So these are the kinds of things that I think are really important for people to know when they're wanting to help children without parental care to recognize that, particularly in places like most of the African continent, there is this ethos of care that's been very effective through a lot of shocks, whether it be things like the AIDS pandemic or things like civil war, right? Even with those disruptions, it's largely worked and so if we don't disrupt that, but we actually support that, then children have better chances. So I think that's important because we do see a lot of children who have no other options. Some of these families will say, "Okay, well, if there's free school down the road, because I don't know how I was going to educate this child." It is quite expensive and it takes quite a lot of of household income in Africa to put children into particularly quality education. And so they'll do that, not realizing what other detrimental effects that has on children and meanwhile, the people coming there from abroad to volunteer - to them, it's an orphanage and these kids are orphans and they have no family, when in fact, their family is right down the street, but they don't have access to them. So you know, these are the kinds of issues that I find that people need to be made aware of and need to consider when they think about their responses. And why don't we support that single parent or that auntie or that uncle or the people who are actually trying to help those children to grow up in a safe and a familiar environment where they have family?

L Lauren Pinkston 25:15

Well, your naming it the "orphan industrial complex" really does give language to what you're talking about because it has become such an industry and a massive money-making philanthropic space that I hope we can dive into some neuroscience and attachment disorders in a bit. But you're bringing to mind a memory... I used to live in the poorest country in Southeast Asia where I was doing anti-trafficking research and we had a an organization pop up. It was a faith based organization. They were not registered in the country and did not have their papers to be able to work in the country, but they were offering free education, free housing, and free food to the children that they found working in brothel-type establishments. And so when it got back to those villages of where those kids were coming, from the parents were like, "Oh, well, if we send our kids into into that exploitive environment, they can get free education, free, free food, free housing." And so it just kind of created that vacuum of exploitation. I think something similar is going on in terms of institutionalized care, so talk to us a little bit more about the orphan industrial complex that you that you talked about already and how when there is a story, a compelling story to be told and people with finances and soft hearts, get involved, where does that space open up for there to be further exploitation of children and how can people be very careful and not being swept up into that system?

D Dr. Kristen Cheney 27:19

Well, the space, again, is profit, right? And I mean, that's partly why I chose to really talk about

the orphan industrial complex because it is provocative and it is really pointing to the fact that there is an industry there, right? And I think that people don't like to talk about that. Just like with adoption, they don't like to talk about it as a market and children as products, but actually, there's even precedent and law that it is the way that they're treated and handled in some of these cases. So yeah, it can be difficult or people have a strong reaction to that. But then I think that also, hopefully it doesn't close them off to it, but then they say, "Why would you call it that?" And I think part of it is because we see that, and as you've already alluded to, people in these local environments will see the exploitative potential, right? And I wouldn't blame those parents for doing that because they are faced with a lot of very constrained choices, right? And so if putting your child into a sort of endangering environment in order to get them into, say, an educational space or a safe space eventually is what you need to do, then that's often what those parents do. A colleague of mine did work on education in refugee camps and there were also instances where he said there were parents who would bring their kids to the edge of the village and say, "walk that way until you hit the refugee camp and say you're an unaccompanied minor" because they knew that they will get better education in the refugee camp that was foreign-funded by all these international organizations than the crumbling little school in their own village. And so that actually opened a lot of opportunities for some of those those children, whether they were in fact unaccompanied refugee minors or not, because they had all this access to these international networks. And so there are some ways in which you could argue, well, it works in the sense that sometimes these kids do get educational sponsorships and these orphanages can be gateways into international adoption, but again, we have to ask: at what cost? Again, there is so much money in some of these that we tend to focus on the material. And this is why there's also this sort of notion of we're rescuing them from this poverty, but actually, what you've done is taken one child out of that environment, but in a very dramatic way. And yet you haven't addressed the issue of poverty at all. And those places in fact, may have exacerbated it in some ways. But people see that these are ways to make money and so what we're seeing is that there's a lot of what we call "suitcase orphanages" popping up and in that case, there's actually not an orphanage, but they might be able to go on social media and find some pictures to make it look like they have children that they're taking care of that are in urgent need of food, or urgent need of education, and they will then solicit donations from sponsors abroad and then just pocket it. And of course, there are those instances in Southeast Asia. For example, Cambodia had a real problem with these kinds of orphanage tourism issues where they would even go advertise in local hangouts where a lot of backpackers would be having a drink or whatever. And they would bring kids that have a sign that says there's a performance at the orphanage tonight - it's $5 and it helps the kids. Let's stop and think about that for a moment. Right? Like, I've seen people even on TripAdvisor and some of these travel review sites say, "yeah, this was a lovely little place or a lovely little performance, and you know, the money helps the kids." But again, how do you know that these kids are seeing any benefit from literally being forced to sing and dance for their dinner? And what does that mean that we find that that's okay, because they're orphans, supposedly, in this environment that that we make them sing and dance for their dinner, right? So in fact, I think it was the Child Safe International did a campaign called "Children Are Not Tourist Attractions" in Cambodia. Even these orphan choirs that tour the world are really problematic, because again, they're not necessarily orphans. They're children who can sing and dance. And a lot of parents actually try to put their children into those because they think there'll be great opportunities where they will make international connections. And again, when those people get home after six intensive months of touring, (I think they're violating a lot of child labor laws in the countries where they're performing, if not their own country's child labor laws) they don't see a dime of it. They don't see a dime of that money. It doesn't benefit them educationally. All they found is that they're six months behind in school and they're exhausted when they come home because they've raised a lot of money for the institution. So there's a lot of exploitive potential there

where kids are sometimes drawn into the orphanage in search of these kinds of resources or in search of education, medicine, whatever it is, and the parents make a decision to put them into those spaces, because the access isn't coming to them as a parent or as a caregiver. And once you get your child into an environment like that, it's very hard to get them out, especially where someone is actually profiting off of them. So, there are also these situations where orphanages are, in fact, parading volunteers through and saying, "Look, we're so poor, the children are sleeping on the floor." Some gap year student who's volunteering or some tourist goes home and says I'm going to do a campaign. I'm going to raise money and buy 50 mattresses. They raise all this money, they send the money to this orphanage and that orphanage director takes a picture of 50 mattresses and says, "Look what we've bought thank you so much." And then if they even bought them in the first place, they actually sell them and the kids are still sleeping on the floor and the next round of volunteers who come through, they can say, "Look how poor we are. The children are sleeping on the floor." And that happens all over again. We see instances where orphanage directors and founders and people like that are very much enriching themselves on the backs of children. And that's why there's been some argument that this should be this should be considered trafficking if you pull children into an institution with the purpose of exploiting them, that needs to be covered under international law as trafficking. But some of that's more subtle and then a continuum of practice. I've also met a lot of people who work in orphanages and say, "No, but we're the good orphanage, right? We don't do that. We don't exploit our kids. We love our kids, but they still need to raise money." Right? And so what do they do? They do have children write the letters, where again, sometimes they feel very exploited in retrospect. Like wow, you raised all that money for the institution who just then sort of kicked them out when they were no longer cute and cuddly and therefore profitable, right? So there's a lot of different practices. We might say, "Oh, well, it's well meaning and so that's okay." But this is why I feel like it's very important for to caution people that you're also being exploited. That desire for you to help is also being exploited in these circumstances and sometimes not always by people who are even conscious of the ways in which they exploit but they have to do what they have to do they have to raise money to keep their orphanage going. These are people whose work relies on that. An organization called Child's i Foundation in Uganda does really good work around this because they had an orphanage and they they moved away from the orphanage model. And what they've done actually is do a pilot where in one county in Uganda, they de-institutionalized. They shut down the institutions by actually repurposing orphanages. And I think this was a really ingenious way of doing it, because if the government says we're going to shut down the orphanages because they're not good for kids, you'll get a lot of pushback and I met a lot of people who say, "No, we love our kids. We do we do right by our kids. We're the good orphanage." So what they do is they have gone and worked through people who are willing to reform, to actually retrain staff so that they're not threatened by them losing their job just by closing the orphanage and sending the kids home. But again, around the world they say 80% of children in orphanages are have living locatable relatives, right? It could be even higher in some of these communities. So they just could go home. So part of what they do is they prepare the children for going home. They really train the staff and they do a community needs assessment to figure out what else could this orphanage be that's not an orphanage but actually supports families to do their job? And so they become things like daycare, they do programs like income generation to help the guardians and caregivers of those children to raise the money to support those children in families. During COVID, they became COVID testing and treatment centers. So there's a lot of different sort of ways that they will be retrained. But it was really about doing this needs assessment saying what can we do with this sort of structure and building it can become a daycare center, kindergarten school, it could be a lot of different things that would support children, especially if the need is education, then it makes sense, right? Like just make it a school and retrain people to run that school or to be teachers. And it's been very successful

actually doing that. So I think that those are, are good examples of ways that we might rethink care for orphans. And anytime I give this lecture to anyone who will listen about the orphan industrial complex, I always inevitably get the question one form or another: How do we know that the orphanage we want to support is a good orphanage? I get this question all the time. And I just said look, I'm over the idea of good or bad orphanages. There's no such thing as a good orphanage. I don't care how well funded they are. I don't care how much attention they have, how much staff ratio to children they have. There are better or worse orphanages. Certainly the ones that go out with the intent to exploit and basically imprison children for profit are obviously worse, I suppose, than those that have good intent. However, even the best orphanages have negative outcomes for children who become adults. And so, you know, it's really about trying to divest to get people to divest from orphanages and to not support orphanages, but to support these other kinds of projects where it can be very difficult because it's not very visible. One of my colleagues in Uganda was doing this baseline study and met someone who was in a brand new orphanage, I think in the west of the country. And this person had been hired as a as a director, but they didn't really have qualifications along those lines. And they said that they were told by the funders who were a foreign faith-based organization, I believe in the US. So we built this building and now we want 50 babies in this in this home by the end of the year and she was like, how am I going to do that? There's not even 50 babies abandoned in the whole country, let alone this district. And they basically said we don't care how you do it. Our donors want to see a full home, because they built this home. They donated all this money and they want to see children in this home. So that's also what drives some of these practices is the donor desire itself, because from a child protection standpoint, a full orphanage is a horrible thing. To have 50 babies who don't have parental care is a horrible thing, but to the donors, they're like "oh, great, we've done a wonderful thing because look at the need." But what they've actually done is create a pull factor that has unnecessarily institutionalized children by going out, sometimes lying to parents saying it's free school or it's free medicine or it's free food, and the only way you can get it is to relinquish your child to us. And by the way, those are great gateways for international adoption sometimes as well, where people lose their children permanently. So that's the problematic, right and that's why I've kind of said I'm going to be unsettled here. As much as I'm an academic who likes nuance and complexity, I'm going to say, look, no such thing as a good orphanage, it just doesn't exist and the better thing to do, even though it may be the harder thing to do in terms of donor desire, is to support children in families. So you know, those are the those kind of messages we put out there.

L Lauren Pinkston 41:04

It really does expose the gaps in in our connection with other parts of the world, and how we've dehumanized the family-centric nature of the Global South. Because in the United States and Canada and in Australia, parts of Europe, you would never drive down the road and see an orphanage set up. Right? We have we have determined that in our countries of origin, and an orphanage is not acceptable. It's not an acceptable form of care for children. So we've moved to a foster care system, even as broken as that is still, but yet we don't think twice about considering that to be the best option for children.

D Dr. Kristen Cheney 42:22

Yeah, we have to ask ourselves, why is that good enough for children in the Global South, but it is not good enough for children in Europe or the U.S. or Canada or Australia of any of these

places?

L Lauren Pinkston 42:34

Yeah. And you're and you're bringing also to light the reality that this leads to trafficking in the sense, and this is maybe where we'll try to hang out for the end of the conversation, but the fact that parents who are not globally minded, maybe have never traveled internationally, don't understand the complexities of of different cultures are being fed a story of child who is a "orphan" and as you said, and I just want to highlight that statistic that we see constantly, at least 80% of children in institutionalized care have living relatives that are searchable and and and reachable that these children are in need of a home. And there was a high profile case out of Uganda, specifically Uganda used to be kind of the hotbed in East Africa for all this going on, and a family who adopted a child realized through her journaling that she still had living family, a living mom and then they they dissolved their adoption on the on the United States side and returned her back to her family and Uganda. And how tragic that whole experience was. Just think about the attachment complexities of of that particular story. And I've heard multiple times from families in Uganda say, "we thought that we were sending our child to get a good education outside of the country and that this family was fostering them and would send them home educated when they were 18." And so, there's a question in here somewhere, but I'd love for you to kind of speak to disrupted attachment. As children are removed from families of care, and especially as volunteers come through and tour orphanages, can you speak to the attachment experience and any neuroscience data that would be helpful for people in ways that we can really be careful as we travel?

D Dr. Kristen Cheney 44:41

Yeah, I can try. I'm not I'm not a neuroscientist, just as a disclaimer, or a developmental psychologist, but I think that research is very clear. They have formed a clear basis of talking about the sort of detrimental effects of institutionalization and that's what led to these decisions like UNICEF, declaring that children, particularly young children, should be in institutional care for as little as possible and why there is a promotion of these sorts of family based models. Even as you said, I think part of the hard sell of that message in the U.S. is the fact that we have an overly fraught foster care system. And yet, when you look at places like like Uganda, or parts of Sub-Saharan Africa, and other parts of the world, there is already this sort of strong informal fostering so a lot of the writing I've also done is just around what we call "child circulation" as a sort of parenting strategy in parts of Africa, where you still have a lot of people living in rural environments, where there just aren't these kinds of basic services, where say the secondary school might be a five mile walk away or something. And so a lot of what families will do is when they get to a point where they don't have those services they look for the uncle or auntie or someone who is living in the city, who has more access to that kind of service and then you say, "hey, you're doing well" and this is also an obligation on the part of the auntie or uncle who's doing well financially or doing relatively better than others in the family to say, "hey, can they come stay with you and go to high school there?" And that's what people will do is children will circulate to afford the best opportunities. Sometimes when they're younger, they'll be sent to live with a with a grandmother maybe further in the village just to help that grandparent, right? So there's sort of a tradition of child circulation at the same time, because of that sense that children aren't... I mean, the cliche saying is "it takes a village", which it does, but that that's also based on the fact that in these communities, it's not the

nuclear family that is privileged. Right? It's not the foregrounded. It's actually the extended family. And so the conceptualization of family is that these are all people who are perfectly capable of taking care of you and doing everything in your best interest, but also the family in the community's best interest. Right? So sometimes it's about well, you know, that grandmother needs that child's help and so the child sometimes doesn't necessarily have a lot of say in that and I think that's that's something that a lot of the scholarship coming out of Africa, a lot of the sort of activism and a lot of the the community work being done is trying to really start to privilege children's voices a little more because admittedly, that's not as strong as the sense of social obligation that you might find in places like the U.S. but again, do I have to point out that the U.S. is the only country that hasn't signed the Convention on the Rights of the Child in the world? So, you know, there's there's different ways of looking at this right. And kind of de-centering certain kinds of narrow centric notions of children family as well. So I think these are important caveats, but now I've forgotten what the initial question is.

L Lauren Pinkston 48:13

Well, honestly, we're gonna get into that with some other doctors as well later on. And I really am just so grateful for the way that you have so beautifully uplifted the familial system in the global south and maybe allowed people to see that families have, for centuries, done such a good job of surrounding children. We were in Uganda last year taking some baseline data from entrepreneurs that we were training and just kind of walking alongside through some business planning, and one of the questions we asked was "how many people are in your family", and it was 10, 12, 13. You know, there was not a distinguish number of these are my biological children and these are the children that I care for and pay their school fees. Everyone was caring for their sister's children if she had passed away or their neighbor's kids they had taken in and so I just love how you've just lifted that up for us and allowed us to see the beauty in that and also to reckon with the fact that we have disrupted a really good system that existed.

D Dr. Kristen Cheney 49:24

I think sometimes there's this potential to glorify the family a little too much. As with everywhere there is violence and families there can be abusive families. And again, I've had people bring that point up. And so I don't wish to romanticize the family too much. But my question to them is always ,"If someone is just like beating their kids senseless every day, how long do you think it is before one of the neighbors intercedes or calls the police or something happens to intervene for that child within the community? As opposed to what we hear from people in orphanages is when they get beat - there's no one to come because they're stuck behind the walls of the orphanage. And so a lot of the abuse that takes place in orphanages actually remains behind closed doors behind walls. And it's never attended to and so that's where part of the trauma also comes for children who ended up growing up in those kinds of spaces. And getting back to your question about attachment, not only does it lead to very difficult sorts of challenges with attachment because when you're growing up in an institutional environment, you severed those family ties, you sever that sense of identity, which is also something that children have a right to a sense of community and identity with, whether it be with their their ethnic affiliation with their nation and so on, but also the sense of family and they don't have that growing up in an orphanage where sometimes there's so few caretakers to children that the caretakers don't remember their names. So it's just, "hey, you." Sometimes their their names end up getting changed and so it makes it even more difficult for them to find

their origins when they come out so that they're very detached from that system. I mean, in a lot of these these places, it's those connections that actually get you the opportunities, not just having a good education, but actually having the connections with people who can put you in a place to take advantage of them. They lose that sort of thing, but they also lose that ability to attach because they don't get that kind of affection, the kind of attention as a young child. So I think those are really important aspects. I had to get noise cancelling headphones to take flights sometimes to Uganda and from Uganda, because I would hear these people having these conversations that would be so disturbing around the fact that they came in, they hung out in an orphanage for a couple of weeks, and someone else would say, "Oh, that was so good of you. We went and loved on those children." I remember one young woman sitting just across the aisle from me on the plane, as we're getting ready to board the plane and getting settled and she said, "You know, yeah, especially these young kids, these toddlers just run and jump on you when you get there and they're so starved for attention." And I had to lean over and go, "You know, that's not normal, right? Like, you know, that's not normal." And she was like, what are you talking about? And I said, "Well, do you know any toddlers? They typically don't run and jump on strangers. They sort of hang out, they cling to their parents leg and they sort of look to their parents to say is this person okay? Is this someone I should know?" And this is why I also say don't make children go hug their auntie they've never met because that speaks to the fact that your children lose control of their bodily autonomy. And so it's good to get kids comfortable with things like physical touch, because when you have these sorts of environments, kids lose that kind of sense of bodily autonomy too, because you have a bunch of strangers from abroad, these strange people picking you up and even taking pictures of you and putting them online. So children's privacy in these situations is horrendously violated and I think sometimes by people who never question it. I've seen actual social media posts where people say, "I'm trying to start a 200 Child orphanage in Ghana. Here's little Susan." They're using her real name as far as I know, they're using her age and they're saying things like she was raped by her uncle. "And so I want to get her into this institution. Send the money." And it's a it's horrifying that you would put that kind of information with a child's face on social media and violate their privacy in that way. But let's just talk about, in institutions where you have volunteers cycling through and they're taking those liberties with kids, right? They're picking them up and hugging them and playing with them and I said, "That's a sign of radical attachment disorder that that toddlers running jump on you as a stranger." And she was horrified, of course, because I was the first person to say like, oh, that's not a wonderful thing, right? But everyone else was praising her and so I said, "Yeah, that sets kids up for attachment problems later in life, but also for sexual abuse, because they don't have the sense of bodily autonomy and that strangers can come and touch them." And so, actually, the darker side, which people don't always like to go to, is that often, people who are inclined towards child molestation, child sexual abusers do love this unfettered access they can get to kids and some of these spaces. And so we've seen really egregious examples of orphanage volunteers and even people who founded orphanages abroad who had been even convicted of sex offenses in their home countries, then go abroad where they're not known and where those governments are not talking to each other enough, clearly, and then they start an orphanage. And you know, dozens of children get abused before they figure out the connection. So yeah, no one wants to hear that I guess. I kind of said "Well, so anyway, have a nice flight" and put my noise cancelling headphones on. But yeah, I think that's obviously that's a hard message to hear, but I just felt like there needs to be this counter narrative to like, "oh, yeah, it's a great thing." Because I said, "What happens when you leave, then someone else comes, and that child's abandoned again?" So say this child is in the orphanage because of a difficult issue like neglect or abandonment in their family, which most of the time they're not. But when all these volunteers cycle through, they get abandoned again and again and again until they learn not to attach and so what does that bode for their future even if something that we just like sexual

abuse doesn't happen, which they're lucky if it doesn't, if they grow up their whole childhoods in an orphanage. But even then, in a good orphanage, they come out not knowing how to attach not having that community support. There were quotes, going back to some of these students who grew up in care and did their their thesis on this, they said some of their colleagues that had the same care experience, youth would say,"I left the institution not even knowing how to cross the street. Because we had been so isolated within the orphanage my entire life. We didn't have experience of the real world in a way that a child in a family would." When you go out with your caregiver and they say hold my hand across the street. Look both ways. They didn't know how to do this in the city, when they got out as a young adult. And so there's a lot of those kinds of issues I think that people don't think through because they think of those orphans as sort of frozen in time as young children and we're not thinking about what that means for their development as they grow up. And so these are the kinds of things that are admittedly difficult to hear about, but I think we really have to consider when we are tempted to do these kinds of things, like volunteer for whether it be a shorter or longer time it doesn't really matter. The fact is, when you have volunteers cycling through, whatever that cycle is, they come and go, and those kids figure out not to attach to anyone in particular because they'll they'll just leave you and that's how they have trouble forming relationships as adults,

L Lauren Pinkston 57:52

Which plays into you know, again, generational trauma and mental health challenges that are passed down through the DNA and ways that the body continues to hold on to a lack of connection, to, like you said, their their roots, their their families of origin, their tribal identities, and then just being launched into the world as adults who aren't equipped to function and just the number of suicides that are so high for children who aged out of care. So okay, well, I'm so grateful for all of the different facets of of this phenomenon that you've brought to light today. I know that as people are listening, especially maybe coming from churches that support an orphanage abroad or maybe they have participated in this in the past, or maybe... I've been approached on Instagram by people who are caring for children and asking for donations or whatever it is, where would you direct people? Because we don't ever want to be the one that says no, I'm not going to send you money or I'm not going to give to this child that's coming up to my window in India and begging for coins. Where do you point people?

D Dr. Kristen Cheney 59:16

I get that question a lot in some form or another. The other kind of form of that question is "Where should I put my money?" So as I say, I think we really need to defund orphanages, and at the same time, I think that we also... I've had this conversation a lot with with other advocates in this area and tried to puzzle out how do we make it appealing, sexy, if you will, to, to really help children and families because part of it is that like you know, they liked the visual of look our money built this beautiful new facility, and now look at all the children who are supposedly thriving in this facility. So I think that that's the brick and mortar argument that people would like to see their donations sort of build something like that. And it's really a lot harder. I think, you know, the marketing of these organizations that are actually trying to do the important work of keeping children and families because sometimes the most effective activism is actually where something doesn't happen. Like something bad doesn't happen, but something good comes out of that which is, for example, that a child or rather a guardian or a

caregiver isn't put in the position of having to put their child into an institutional facility in order to gain access to these resources. So I mean, part of the outcome of going back to my book, Crying For Our Elders, part of the disclaimer I put in that book at the beginning is that it's not really about orphanhood. But I had to keep "orphan" in the title to get you to read it, but really poverty is the issue. And orphanhood can exacerbate childhood poverty, especially in a lot of these contexts. But that's not the issue itself in some ways was the sort of conclusion I came to in doing that research. But again, I felt like I can't write a book about childhood poverty because that would be boring. Like who's going to read that? But I say orphans and everyone goes, "aw, orphans" so it's part of like, how do we pick apart what I call the "orphan mystique", right. Like how do we actually kind of demystify that narrative and actually look at what are the practices that really helped children thrive at the end of the day, look at the evidence based, absorb it, take it in and change our behavior accordingly? I think some of this really does go back to this sort of notion of the deserving poor - that people would rather sponsor a child for the price of a cup of coffee every day then actually help that mother who maybe just needs a very small injection of income to start her own little business that would give her enough money to pay the school fees, right? But people say well, you know, she's she's poor through some fault of her own. The child though is innocent and we'd rather actually remove that child from everything they know, in some ways, than help that child in families. And so I think you know, it is it is a harder sell because of that. So firstly, it is demystifying that notion and maybe just availing ourselves of some of that, based on the evidence that we have. But also, people being willing to really support a lot of these community based organizations. They're doing really good work to support families because, as I said, this friend of mine who had an orphanage said, "When I had an orphanage, it's way easier to raise money, but now that we're actually doing the right thing." It's really hard because people go well, but like, you know, "I'm not saving an orphan that and I'm just keeping a child with their mother or with their family". And that's not just right. It's actually really that's really important and it's very hard to switch, you know, that message to kind of turn it on its head when it's so prevalent and so perennial, you know, we've had these sorts of narratives about orphanhood and adoption, what have you, for a long time that it's very hard for people to disavow themselves. Of those notions. And I think we just need to detach our own egos from it and say, "Well, you know, if it's really about helping children, then it's not about me getting a social media shot of me helping It's not about me, having this sort of visual evidence of my charitable instincts, and it's not about fulfilling my own desire to help. It's really about keeping what is best for children, front and center, and really listening to the experience of people like care experience youth, of adult adoptees who get disregarded all the time, in favor of maintaining these sorts of happy ever after narratives when time and again, they've told us this is really fraught it's really traumatizing and it's really difficult." I understand people's need to want to help. I think what I tell young people because I talk to, you know, college students and so on all the time is, you know, get qualified. If you really want to work with children, don't do that in an unqualified way. And I know it's a hard sell because you want to go off with your backpack for a summer and show that you did something but you really need to know what you're doing or you could cause a lot of harm. And so knowing what you don't know is really difficult too, but that's what we also have to be aware of.

L Lauren Pinkston 59:47

And there's a there's a saying that goes around, especially in the mission space a lot, that "God doesn't call it call the qualified he qualifies the called" and that is incredibly detrimental in the space of childcare. I'm not sure who coined that phrase, but one that I think has has opened the door for a lot of harm to be done and best practices to be ignored because we just assume that our intentions will be good enough.

D Dr. Kristen Cheney 1:05:30

Yeah, that kind of shows that "I can just build the plane while it's in flight" and actually we have the evidence that that's having really deleterious effect. As I said, even on broader interrupts the sort of broader efforts with people to really reform the childcare system. So even you know, talking to governments or the UN, you know, said we have an opportunity here, even with things like development funding to move that towards not only divesting from orphanages, but investing in making more robust child protection systems that benefit children all around. So not just children without parental care, but you know, in prevention of violence against children and all kinds of ways, within communities if we strengthen communities, that's really the way to help children the most and so, if we can really cooperate with those governments who have parental perennially underfunded child protection systems, especially where there is a sort of injection of you know, private humanitarian charitable donations, the church based faith based funding, those sorts of things. We really need to compete with that in some ways. And so I've made that call even to governance to say you need to you have the opportunity to be an example here where you really help to, to actually build out these systems that would would counter some of the these negative effects.

L Lauren Pinkston 1:06:58

I hope that every church will be able to find their way to this conversation and to understand the role that we're playing in global, I say "we"because I still tether myself to the Christian faith and to the church, and that there will be men and women of courage to stand up and question what has been done for decades and to say, like you said, we have a plethora of research to say this is not the best practice moving foward.

D Dr. Kristen Cheney 1:07:27

But that's also what's difficult, right? It's like sometimes when I'm talking to people, it's not just they have to come to terms with what say one individual volunteer has done, but it's the fact that a church has been sponsoring an orphanage for decades, a school has been supporting and sending their students to an institutional facility abroad for decades and so it's about those relationships as well. And it's about doing that hard work, not just of divesting from it and going oh, no, we've done a bad thing. I mean, that's in itself is difficult enough to come to terms with I think, but but also doing the work of then learning you know, and bringing in people who are who are experienced in these areas, and trying to also change hearts and minds on both sides, the donor side, but also the recipient side and say is there something we could be doing better here? You know, look at the research that says this isn't the way to go. And I've seen that happen, too. I've seen people very sold on their sort of model of like making a better orphanage and have just been like, no, I'm not impressed and been very offended because it's like you're the first person who hasn't been impressed with me. But that has changed over time. It's taken a while. It's taken years. But now this organization I'm thinking of who is improving orphanages in India is now divested entirely of orphanages, and this changed their whole model because they listened and it took them time to absorb it, but they shifted gears they got away from orphanage tourism. They got away from supporting orphanages in any way, shape, or form and are supporting building up families and communities and the child

protection system. So that's really gratifying to see but it's hard. It's hard work and you have to as an organization, be willing to not only come to terms with what you've been doing, and the fact that that may have had unintended harmful consequences, but also to then do the hard work of thinking about how do we redirect that desire and that will to do good in such a way that it actually does? And that's something that needs to be done, but can be very hard to do and I understand that , but I hope to see more doing that in the future.

L Lauren Pinkston 1:09:39

I do too and I I have thank you for ending us on a note of hope that you've seen it done that it is possible, and that it's going to be the courageous among us who are willing and able to make that change. We'll make sure to link to your book in the show notes. And also we'll put in a link to Hopeland's petition to end orphanage trafficking around the world as a global initiative to really push legislation forward from the UN and through global treaties and such to end orphanage tourism as well. So Kristen, thank you so much for your time, for your energy around really bringing to light what has been what's been done, and I'm really really grateful to share your knowledge with everyone today.

D Dr. Kristen Cheney 1:10:28

Thank you so much for the invitation and for bringing light to this issue. I appreciate it.