



### Abstract

Legal obligations for reporting child abuse and neglect have positioned suspicion as a trigger for nursing responses. Suspicion dwells between emotion and thought, and is fraught with uncertainty. Given the importance of suspicion to initiating child protection, suspicion requires critical examination. Spinoza's ideas of the imagination, and his distinctive inclusion of emotions in understanding human knowledge, provide a framework to explore the human experience of suspicion. These theoretical dimensions of suspicion are illustrated using a recent newspaper article of a missing child in Sydney, Australia. This process reveals the ontological vulnerability of the human mind to construct knowledge that is heavily influenced by our emotionality, our close social connections and our social values. Attending to these vulnerabilities generates new possibilities for understanding and using human suspicions of child abuse and neglect more effectively and creatively in nursing practice.

**Key Words** child abuse and neglect, mandatory reporting, nursing practice, Spinoza, suspicion

## Battling the Passions: The Birth of a Conceptual Understanding of Suspicion for Child Abuse and Neglect

**ROCHELLE EINBODEN, TRUDY RUDGE  
& COLLEEN VARCOE**

### Introduction

Suspicions amongst thoughts, are like bats amongst birds, they ever fly by twilight. ...There is nothing makes a man suspect much, more than to know little; and therefore men should remedy suspicion, by procuring to know more, and not to keep their suspicions in smother. Francis Bacon[1 p158]

Suspicion is a common human experience, "a feeling or thought that something is possible, likely, or true." [2] Suspicion transverses the borderlands between emotions and rationality, and oscillates between knowledge and

uncertainty. In his paper *Of Suspicion*, Francis Bacon[1] highlights the mysterious quality of suspicious thought, and suggests with dark overtures that it demands timely remedy.

As human agents, nurses experience suspicion within and outside of their practice. While relevant in many contexts, child abuse and neglect provides a particularly rich example to illustrate the complexity of suspicion and its implications. In several countries, legal obligations for reporting child abuse and neglect have set suspicion as a trigger for a cascade of responses to concerns about child safety. In this context, suspicion is usually constructed as simply present or absent, while health care providers struggle with a more illusive experience, and with the implications of reporting concerns to authorities.[3-5] Despite this, and the fact that an 'index of suspicion' seems integral to health care practice, there are surprisingly few theoretical discussions of suspicion in relation to child abuse.[4] In light of the role suspicion occupies in addressing the prevalence of a social problem as significant as child abuse and neglect, a conceptual understanding of the human experience of

suspicion is warranted.[6]

In this paper, suspicion as it is discussed in key philosophical writings is introduced, and an analysis of the nature of suspicion is proposed by applying relevant theoretical dimensions of Spinoza's philosophy to how suspicion is represented within a recent column about a missing child. While Spinoza's perspectives remain on the margins of philosophical thought, a resurgence of contemporary support emphasises his ability to offer a departure from dominant ways of understanding the human condition and our social and political worlds.[7-10] Moving beyond familiar considerations of complex social issues, Spinoza "offers a refreshing perspective on traditional impasses concerning freedom and determinism, the mind and the body, and society and nature." [7 p593] Thus, Spinoza is useful for thinking through suspicion in the context of child abuse and neglect.

Spinoza's distinct conceptualisations of knowledge include human emotion and assert there are predictable flows or patterns to common emotive experiences.[11] He suggests while true ideas are not easily accessible to humans, wisps of truth can be revealed through reflection and reasoning on our nature and the patterns of our passions.[9,12] Of particular use for understanding suspicion are: Spinoza's epistemological concept of imagination (the most common type of knowledge that involves initial sense perception and interpretation); the three basic emotions (joy, pain, and desire); and the influences of these emotions on imagination. These ideas will be described and then illustrated using an analysis of a recent newspaper opinion column about a missing child.[13] An excerpt of this column will be presented initially, followed by philosophical ideas of suspicion, and finally, these ideas will be used as a framework for the analysis of how suspicion is presented in the opinion column. Through this discussion and analysis, suspicion will be pulled from an existence in the shadows towards a conceptual understanding, offering a new perspective on some of the challenges nurses face in relation to suspicion in the context of child abuse and neglect.

### Suspicion illustrated: the case of missing Kiesha

Six-year old Kiesha Abrahams was reported missing from her home in suburb of Sydney, Australia, by her mother on August 1, 2010 at 10:00 am. The front door was ajar, with no evidence of forced entry. Kiesha was last seen when put to bed the night before at 9:30 pm. She had been absent from school and unseen by anyone outside her immediate family since the birth of her brother, three weeks earlier. Suspicions stormed though the imaginations of community; within days

the family pleaded for the 'trial by media' to be called off and to be left alone. The following excerpt is from an opinion column in the Sydney Morning Herald written by Miranda Devine, on August 12, 2010:

#### ***Kiesha's shrine reminds us why her name must be remembered***

*...Outside a dismal, liver-coloured block of flats on busy Woodstock Avenue kind-hearted locals were gathering with their children, as they have done every day just after dusk, to light candles and lay toys at an impromptu shrine for missing six-year-old Kiesha Abrahams.*

*In the 11 days since her reported disappearance, the shrine has spread the entire length of the fence outside the unit block where she spent her last mystery-shrouded days. By Monday there were more than 500 teddy bears, dinosaurs, dolls and assorted stuffed animals, a hundred candle holders, a set of rosary beads, a cross, and a dozen handwritten notes, many with cut-out newspaper photos of Kiesha with her now familiar clenched smile and brown ringlets.*

*Such a heartfelt outpouring of concern is the other side of this forgotten area of Sydney, where social problems are epidemic and social services fail at every step. ...They are the addresses most likely to crop up in news stories about damaged children.*

*...Left to their own devices, the locals have forged a strong sense of community and purpose. Drawn to Woodstock Avenue by pictures of Kiesha in the media, they talk non-stop about a little girl they never knew as police work inside the first-floor unit, carrying carpet and doors out to forensic vans.*

*... "It just amazes me how much people care," says Rhonda Hines, 47, a mother of six. "I'm so proud I live in Mount Druitt. People run it down but when something like this happens we all pull together."*

*... "I feel so sad for the little child. It's not right," said Reno Scevola, 43, who has strong theories about what has happened to Kiesha, which are, of course, unprintable. Almost everyone has solved the case in their minds, and they discuss their theories endlessly, analysing the body language of Kiesha's mother, Kristi Abrahams, and stepfather, Robert Smith, on TV last week. Since telling police she woke up on August 1 to find Kiesha missing and fronting up to a media conference three days later in dark glasses and barely able to speak, she has scarcely been seen. The young mother and her family...have been staying in various motels. They returned briefly to pick up some clothes but missed a poignant ceremony in the park next door on Sunday, when about 200 people gathered to release balloons to guide Kiesha home.*

*...At dusk whole families arrive. Cathy Stone, 38, brings a box of tea lights and kneels carefully to light them. "When you've got kids you just feel compelled to come here," says Stone... "Isn't it a wonderful thought that so many people care? There's not a person here that wouldn't have taken that little girl*

*home and looked after her...It's nice to think you are lighting the candles to show her the way home, but I think she's probably not coming back."*

*The public grief of the people who lived around Kiesha in her six short years may seem curious to outsiders, but it is this community concern that is the most important protection for children in dysfunctional environments. It is rooted in instinctive notions of right and wrong, which are often clearer to those at the bottom of the heap. They might have jumbled families of their own, but they know where the ice addicts live, and they know in which families children are safe and in which they aren't. When government bureaucracies and the rest of Sydney let them down, they have each other.[13]*

The case of Kiesha and this particular opinion column provide a useful contemporary context to consider suspicion. An analysis will follow the discussion of suspicion, and in particular, the application of Spinoza's ideas will illustrate how suspicion is fuelled by the materiality of imagination, emotion, and connections with the collective.

### Philosophical foundations of suspicion

When Descartes cautioned that all is not as it seems, he influenced philosophy and scrutinised doubt with the development of the 'scientific method'. [14] Theologians demonstrate an interest in suspicion and in some instances, have positioned it in opposition to faith. [14,15] Ricoeur's essay, *Freud and Philosophy*, is an important work for suspicion conceptually, because it tracks its evolution in philosophical thought, develops ideas specific to the 'hermeneutics of suspicion' and identifies three masters of suspicion (Marx, Nietzsche and Freud). Ricoeur contrasts two interpretations of suspicion: a traditional one involving "recollecting meanings" [14 p32]; and a radical one, that aims at "reducing illusions and lies of consciousness". [14 p32] Highlighted between these two versions is a fundamental irreconcilability regarding the nature of truth. [16] Of particular interest to a contemporary conceptualisation of suspicion is the latter version, which is associated with the ideas of Marx, Nietzsche and Freud. Ricoeur draws theoretical connections between the three, identifying that they "seemingly dominate the school of suspicion...the intention that they had in common...[was] the decision to look upon the whole of consciousness primarily as "false" consciousness". [14 p32-3] Ricoeur asserts that this marks a threshold for a shift in philosophical thought and considers Nietzsche the most influential. According to Ricoeur,

*the whole of philosophy becomes interpretation. ...It is no longer the Kantian question of how a subjective representation or idea can have objective validity; this*

*question, central to a critical philosophy, gives way to a more radical one. ...which is no longer either error in the epistemological sense or lying in the moral sense, but illusion. ...[and] this use of interpretation as a tactic of suspicion and as a battle against masks; this use calls for a very specific philosophy which subordinates the entire problem of truth and error to the expression of the will to power.[14 p25-6]*

Ricoeur weaves together these three 'masters', and hints at Spinoza's influence, but does not examine Spinoza's ideas closely. He does however, make reference to Spinoza shaking the foundations of interpretations of scripture with an alternative interpretation of nature, and suggests that the teachings of Spinoza's Ethics are relevant to understanding Freud's libido, Nietzsche's will to power, and Marx's imperialism of the dominant class. The assertion that Spinoza was Nietzsche's sole predecessor is shared by Deleuze and Nietzsche himself. [10,14] However, it is Spinoza's philosophy that provides the foundational ideas to conceptually understand the nature of suspicion within rationalist tradition, that is, it offers the ability to gain knowledge through the process of reasoning.

### Spinoza and suspicion

Existing somewhere between emotion and thought, suspicion might be difficult to discuss within theories which explore rationality in opposition with, or as separate from, emotion. Rather than discounting emotions as irrational or in opposition to reason, Spinoza asserts that emotions may give rational insights into the human condition. [11,12] Suspicion can be illuminated within what Spinoza describes as the 'primary' way of knowing; imagination. According to Spinoza, there are three types of coexisting knowledge: imagination, rational thought, and intuition. Imagination is the most common human knowledge but also the most confused type and gives rise to 'inadequate' ideas or 'falsity'. This can be explained by Spinoza's ontological conceptualisations, specifically "the materiality of the imagination; its connections with collectives and hence with sociability; and its relations with emotion". [12 p12]

Spinoza asserts that all things are one substance, an indivisible entity, which he describes as 'Nature', or 'God'. [11] To Spinoza, Nature/God is essentially all that is; "there is, therefore, no substance other than God...this means that it is wrong to suppose, as theists do, that corporeal substance was created by a God who is fundamentally different from it". [17 p56] Instead of human bodies being distinct entities created by Nature/God, Spinoza demonstrates how we are singular finite expressions of Nature/God, or modes, of one

infinite substance. Thus, singular human bodies are parts of the greater collective human body (just as they too are composed of parts). The essence of this one substance is its infinite attributes, expressed in an infinite number of finite thoughts, and an indefinite number of finite bodies; with human beings but one finite way Nature/God expresses itself in both thought and extension.[18] It follows that Nature/God has and is every thought and every body.[18]

The human mind is, for Spinoza, an idea of the body.[11] Therefore, by its very nature, it is inevitable that the human mind would narrowly focus only on the affections of its singular body.[12] This frame of reference for the human mind is significant in understanding imagination. Deleuze explores imagination by describing 'signs', or "the trace of one body upon another, the state of a body insofar as it suffers the action of another body".[9 p22] According to Deleuze (following Spinoza) signs are always effects, interpreted by states of the body in reacting to an engagement with surrounding bodies. A sign can have multiple meanings, and creates an affect that the body perceives (affection) as experiences of either physical strengthening or weakening.[9] The mind perceives affections as images of its affected body and the other bodies that affect it.[11,12] The imagination, with its confused images and signs, is influenced by the interpretations of the mind embedded in how its body is affected at a certain point in time. This influence is experienced by the body as either strengthening or weakening, and hence aligns positively or negatively to the affect (sign); pleasure as expressions of joy, pain as expressions of sadness. It is of key importance to recognise the symbolic nature of signs and images. They do not directly correspond to objects and they cannot be understood causally or concretely.[9] Instead, signs refer to other signs, and thus "have as their referent confused mixtures of bodies and obscure variations of power, following an order which is that of Chance or the fortuitous encounter between bodies".[9 p23-4] Following this, signs and knowledge of the imagination might be better understood optically,

effects or signs are shadows that play on the surface of bodies...always on the border. ...In Spinoza, everything is light, and the Dark is only a shadow, an effect of light, a limit of light on the bodies that reflect it (affection) or absorb it (affect). The variations of power ...constitute degrees of chiaroscuro, the augmentation of power being a brightening, the diminution of power, a darkening.[9 p24]

These shadows are passively received imprints, and are how we are aware of our own body and other bodies, essentially, how we know we both exist, and exist as part of a greater collective, and of all infinite substance. Hence, we exist in a

social state as embodied interaction between light and dark, power and powerlessness; our sociability embodied and experienced through the signs and images of imagination.

The imagination understands the world through shadows and gives rise to inadequate knowledge, or confused, false ideas.[11] Despite this, "Spinoza's version of imagination involves an equally strong emphasis on the reality of the mental. ...The figments of the imagination are just as real – just as appropriate as objects of systematic investigation – as the modifications of matter".[12 p12] Thus despite their falsity, imagined ideas are experienced as no less real than true ideas. Thoughts that arise from being affected by the collective create "a multiplicity which both enriches the possibilities of human knowing and creates an unavoidable confusion at its very core".[12 p13]

If Spinoza's lens of imagination is applied to suspicion we have the opportunity to better understand it, and as suggested in the Ethics, continue toward truth. While confused, signs, as they occur in the context of knowledge in or through shadows and images, can lead us to rational knowledge (the second type of knowledge).[9] Spinoza explains,

Real doubt is never produced in the mind by the thing doubted of. In other words, if there were only one idea in the mind, whether that idea were true or false, there would be no doubt or certainty present, only a certain sensation. For an idea is in itself nothing else than a certain sensation. But doubt will arise through another idea, not clear and distinct enough for us to be able to draw any certain conclusions with regard to the matter under consideration; that is, the idea which causes us to doubt is not clear and distinct. To take an example. Supposing that a man has never reflected, taught by experience or by any other means, that our senses sometimes deceive us, he will never doubt whether the sun be greater or less than it appears. Thus rustics are generally astonished when they hear that the sun is much larger than the earth. But from reflection on the deceitfulness of the senses doubt arises, and if, after doubting, we acquire a true knowledge of the senses, and how things at a distance are represented through their instrumentality, doubt is again removed.[19 p17-8]

Here, Spinoza addresses the sensation of doubt, describing how it arises with one idea in reference to another unclear idea. He demonstrates concerns with sense perceptions and how our senses deceive us by providing the analogy of the sun; for example, if we did not know the sun is bigger than the earth our senses would convince us otherwise, and that would be the only idea, nothing in question. However, if we learn that the sun is very far from earth and thus only appears smaller, we also correlate the idea of the sun with the ideas of limitations of our sense perception, and together doubt

would disappear and we would actively reason truth about both the nature of the sun, and the nature of our senses. This process of reasoning (of which the human mind is capable) moves us into the second kind of knowledge described as common notions. Deleuze uses the analogy of light to explain the difference between our minds' rational abilities or the power of reason to bring about true ideas compared with the confused ideas of imagination,

common notions are concepts of objects, and objects are causes. Light is no longer reflected or absorbed by bodies that produce shadows; it makes bodies transparent by revealing their intimate "structure" (fabrica). This second aspect of light, and the intellect is the true apprehension of the structures of the body, whereas the imagination merely grasped the shadow of one body upon another.[9 p24]

### Emotions and the production of images

Spinoza describes three basic emotions desire, joy and pain, from which all other emotions are derived. For Spinoza, human vulnerability to doubt is rooted in challenges with sense perception and imagination, and in our materiality as part of a collective. As part of a collective body, we are deeply affected by emotions and affections of other human beings, however our knowledge of these affections is indistinct. Due to the singularity of our minds, we consciously experience affections from our social connections as confused with our own. Gatens and Lloyd explain:

The body, of which the mind is an idea, is not insulated from the rest of nature; it is not a self-contained whole within the totality of the material world. In being aware of its body the mind is aware not just of one material thing but other bodies impinging on that body. ... This experience of other bodies together with our own is the basis of imagination. But it is also the basis of Spinoza's account of the emotions or 'affects'. Where those bodies are like our own – human bodies which undergo similar modifications – this experience of other bodies can intensify our awareness of our own desires, joys and pains. Already, Spinoza's treatment of minds and bodies evokes a basic sociability which is inseparable from the understanding of human individuality.[12 p14]

Conceptualised as part of a collective, humans have common experience of 'passions' or emotions, but unique expressions of our singularity can be seen in the variations between conditions that trigger a response of joy or pain. These variations are related to the associations we develop within the context of our individual experience, not to unique affections; part of being human is to experience joy, pain and desire and these emotions have some predictable order.[12] The social aspects of existence influence humans in an embodied way, to which our minds are not

immediately privy. However, at the same time we experience affects of the collective, which lead to more confusion. This creates 'order' of its own, allowing a rational investigation of the passions. Our unique experiences and expressions of emotions explain the fundamental difficulty with articulating common understandings of suspicion. Similarly shrouded by the collective, suspicion is influenced by affections of other bodies, which "intensify our awareness of our own desires, joys and pains".[12 p14] At the same time, like doubt, suspicion is evoked in relation to unclear ideas and affections, experienced and expressed by singular individuals uniquely. These unique experiences of common affections also illuminate our ongoing challenges to understand each other; as singular beings we learn that our emotional experiences differ from others in both range and intensity, even in seemingly similar situations.

All finite modes of substance seek to persevere in being, and move toward increasing power. Spinoza terms this tendency 'conatus'. The influence of passions confuses our ability to choose from the many of those ideas and bodies that actually increase our strength and power (experiences of joy or pleasure). Spinoza describes this, "if we imagine a thing which is accustomed to affect us with the emotion of pain to have something which is similar to another thing, which is accustomed to affect us with an equally great emotion of pleasure, we shall simultaneously love and hate the same thing".[11 p177] He explains how doubt is related to our connection with diverse bodies, and how the same object may elicit even contrary emotions in a singular body, identifying our lack of ability to sustain separation and the increase of ambivalence. Doubt weighs heavily, and in the context of time, fuels both hope and fear,

hope is simply an inconstant pleasure which has arisen from the image of a thing that is future or past, about whose outcome we are in doubt. Fear, on the contrary, is an inconstant pain, which has also arisen from the image of a thing that is doubtful. If doubt is removed from these emotions, then hope becomes confidence and fear becomes despair: namely, pleasure or pain which has arisen from the image of a thing which we have feared or hoped.[11 p179]

Suspicion in synonymy with doubt works in a similar way, arising from unclear ideas, influencing joy, pain and desire, transforming them into variations of affection.

For Spinoza, desire is a passion which should be understood as productive instead of constructed in the context of lack.[10] Understanding desire as producing value and importance, rather than occurring in only the absence of an object is an important distinction, one which follows in the writings of

Nietzsche, Deleuze and Foucault.[10,20] In contrast, Freud and Lacan consider desire as lack, involving emotions such as envy.[10,21] Schrift discusses Nietzsche's position on the implications of desire in relation to knowledge, "One gets the sort of knowledge one "needs", and what one "needs" is conditioned by what one "wants", one's *interests*." [10 p178] There is "no object of desire without a desiring consciousness to constitute the object as *desirable*. But contrary to the view of desire-as-lack, the experience of desire is not derivative upon the object; rather, it precedes and "produces" the object desired". [10 p182] Instead of disinterested, dispassionate objectivity, Nietzsche follows Spinoza's assertions that objectivity and true knowledge arise from the ability to consider one's own interests, preferences and aversions while engaging openly with other perspectives, interpretations and affections. [10] This openness acknowledges one's own preferences as central to knowing, and self-awareness exposes and diminishes their illusive power, allowing for rational pursuit of true ideas. Thus, the effects of passions on the "logic of the imagination...yield systematic variations of intensity of attachment an aversion...fluctuations which are different from reason/logic...but have an order of their own which can be investigated". [12 p26] Spinoza's theory supports the possibility of revealing the structure of suspicion through a careful conceptual analysis, which attends to the symbolic nature of images or signs and the effects of passions within our social context.

### Suspicion: conceptual beginnings

Remembering Francis Bacon's warning, "nothing makes a man suspect much, more than to know little", [1 p158] suspicion exists in the context of a privation of knowledge. Spinoza agrees: "Someone who has a true idea knows at the same time that he has a true idea, and cannot doubt about the truth of the matter". [11 p150] Like doubt, suspicion is a feeling or thought that arises in relation to another unclear idea or sensation in the body, and is correlated with a lack of knowledge. Spinoza confirms, "Falsity consists in the privation of knowledge in which inadequate, i.e. mutilated and confused, ideas involve". [11 p143] However, he postulates that it is not absolute lack of knowledge (ignorance of both mind and body); rather it is that the mind is deceived by shadows of the imagination. Spinoza exposes individual human autonomy to be a common deception of the human mind, existing only within imagination.

Men are deceived in that they think themselves free, and opinion which consists simply in the fact that they are conscious of their actions and ignorant of the causes by which those actions are determined. This,

therefore, is their idea of liberty: that they know no cause of their actions. For when they assert that human actions depend on the will, these are just words, of which they have no idea. They are all ignorant of what the will is and how it moves the body, and those who boast otherwise and invent dwelling-places and habitations for the soul tend to evoke laughter or disgust. So also, when we see the sun, we imagine it to be about two hundred feet distant from us; an error which consists, not in this imagination alone, but in the fact that whilst we imagine the sun in this way we are ignorant of its true distance *and of the cause of this imagination*. For even after we get to know that the sun is distant from us by over six hundred diameters of the earth we shall still imagine it to be close at hand. For we imagine the sun to be so close, not because we are ignorant of its true distance, but because of an affection of our body involves the essence of the sun in so far as the body is affected by the sun. [11 p144, italics added]

For humans to continue to battle the deceptions of our imagination is to tackle suspicion at its core. However, even true ideas cannot dispel the image from the mind; we will still for example, see the sun in the same way. This can be understood within our corporeal realities,

This tenacity of the image in no way suggests a flaw in human nature; it is just the mind's confrontation with the body – the nature of the mind as idea of body. An image understood, nonetheless, has a different place in the life of the mind from that of an image whose causes are not understood. The mind which understands the causes of its awareness of action and appetite, is ...a very different mind from one which has the awareness of action and appetite without that understanding. The lives of the wise are very different from the lives of the ignorant, although both are subject to the same necessities. [12 p37]

Of central importance is the understanding that suspicion flits amongst tenacious shadowy images and signs as an effect. Common understandings settle this. When we do not think about how our senses are routinely illusionary, imagination gets pushed to the back of our minds, but when disrupted, illusion erupts doubt and shadow everywhere. Suspicion cannot offer truth, only affected and confused ideas that persist despite awareness of these limitations.

### *Suspicion illustrated*

The opinion column presented at the outset of this paper follows an eleven-day media saturation of Kiesha's disappearance. The columnist applauds the community's activities and inundates readers with both images garnered from aspects of Kiesha's case which are described in detail, as well as those which are conspicuously missing. Following Spinoza, each person reacts to information

about a missing child uniquely depending on personal histories and experiences. However, there are common and patterned reactions as well. Common reactions are related to the necessity of each human mind to develop knowledge primarily through images and the mind's vulnerability to the influence of our emotions and those of others. Passions infiltrate our thinking and stir up confused images, which in turn are intensified by the multiplicity of expressions of the collective; in this case, passions are fuelled by practices of mass media. Ideas and images of a missing child rupture the perception of safety and evoke intense emotions in individuals and in the community. This rupture provokes a struggle of interpretation within the human mind, as images imprint unpleasant feelings, shadow, and a diminution of power. Uncertainty allows suspicions to smoulder and give way to fear. As we strive to persevere in our own being (conatus), we are compelled to remove what causes us pain, and our desires are active and effective in this process. The central desire for a safe and familiar social environment is thwarted by the mystery of Kiesha's disappearance. Uncertainty allows imagination of too many possible threats to control, and incites an overwhelming desire to 'know'. The community and the media use suspicion as a means of organising images and ideas (emphasising some ideas and avoiding others) in a way that produces what is desired; a perception of safety for the collective.

This activity includes differentiating Kiesha's family (and especially her mother) from the community and then constructing them as responsible. The articles kids slanderously towards explicit accusations by describing Kiesha's mother as "scarcely... seen" since "fronting up to a media conference in dark glasses and barely able to speak"; and indicating how "almost everyone has solved the case in their minds".[13] Blaming the family for Kiesha's disappearance is an available option as the family already occupies a marginalised social position. The low socioeconomic status of the family is established through descriptions of the "dismal" and "forgotten" neighbourhood.[13] Kiesha's family members are portrayed as vagrants for "staying in various motels", despite the police having completely undone their home (ripping out carpets and unhinging doors) for forensic investigation.[13] While Kiesha is constructed as innocent and vulnerable, her mother is portrayed as fully responsible for the failure to protect her, suggesting child safety can and should be managed by mothers. Establishing the inadequacy of Kiesha's mother functions to display and contain the tragedy to an individual failure instead of a community threat.

Erosion of Kiesha's mother's worth and moral character

improves the believability and effect of these images; a task Devine accomplishes. Kristi Abrahams is described as young, unmarried, and living with a man who is not Kiesha's biological father, inferring she has had several partners. Devine mentions that Kiesha's family is known to the Department of Child Services, but there is no mention that another child of Kristi's has previously died, nor is there mention that Kristi identifies as an Aboriginal person; these aspects of the story sit as commonly known background from other news reports.[22] Kristi's actions are placed like shadows in a sequence to develop certainties where there are none. The article reports her, "barely able to speak", [13] without contextualising this within the fact that she delivered another baby a few weeks ago. Her abject openness and vulnerability is met with intolerance as she spills raw unbounded inarticulate emotion.[23] Kristi's inability to keep herself together to address the media is offered as evidence of her guilt. Kristi's vulnerabilities and marginalisation are concealed and her ability to keep her children safe is assumed, even within a society that positions her with little relative power.

The community members "... discuss their theories endlessly, analysing the body language of Kiesha's mother, Kristi Abrahams, and stepfather, Robert Smith, on TV".[13] Ideas "not clear and distinct enough for us to be able to draw any certain conclusions with regard to the matter under consideration", [19] have led to "unprintable" suspicions implicating the family. Suspicions offer a tempting alternate to displace images of fear with family guilt. These ideas are imagined as knowledge; "almost everyone has solved the case in their minds"; and "they know where the ice addicts live, and they know in which families children are safe and in which they aren't".[13] From Spinoza's perspective it is both natural and necessary for the human mind to imagine knowledge of what happened to Kiesha in a way that follows a desire to decrease distress. In this case, this process is so strong that the community (and the columnist) ventures to claim that they knew all along that Kiesha was not safe and they know what happened to her, despite the lack of evidence from extensive police investigation (even months later).

Safety for the collective is also produced through reconstructing perceptions of the community as close, connected and safe. The fact that Kiesha is missing has interrupted this perception, but Devine employs heavy use of rhetorical imagery to dampen any confusion. Kiesha had not been to school and no one other than her immediate family had seen her for three weeks. Devine's "kind hearted locals" did not know Kiesha ("they talk non-stop about a little

girl they never knew”), nor did they notice her presence or absence in the community.[13] Kiesha was unknown and invisible. It is only in her public absence that she has evoked a “*heartfelt outpouring of concern*”. [13] While the community knows “*where children are safe*” and “*anyone would have taken her in*”, no one said or did anything to protect her.[13] The responsibility to protect her, after all, is not theirs. Social ideologies of ‘family values’ and ‘parental rights’ allocate responsibility for children’s welfare solely to parents, within legislated boundaries. Even with legal mandates to report violence against children, there is a particular assignment of responsibility that results in absolution at social, community and individual levels, except, as in this case, the assignment of full responsibility and blame to mothers. It might also be argued that in our societies, no one wants to get involved in the private matters of families, that it takes too much time or trouble. However, that argument obscures the overwhelming social desire to get involved in selective and intrusive ways, and oversimplifies very complex social and political interests in maintaining ideologies of family and childhood.[24] In reference to a review of media representations of individual missing children in the United States, Conrad observes, “As much as punishing individuals served to displace collective guilt and responsibility, so too did the emphasis on institutional concern over individual abused or missing children deflect attention away from the fact that all children are voiceless, powerless and ‘missing’ in American policy.”[24 p331]

The desire to preserve the status quo in power relations for children and families also may be behind the distracting production of “*public grief*”. [13] Kiesha’s neighbours linger outside her family home and build a shrine as a symbol of caring, and in effort to “*forge a strong sense of community and purpose*”. [13] Rhonda, a mother of six children (and unlike Kristi, an expert mother), is “*proud*” to live in a community that “*pulls together*”. [13] Devine interprets community concern out of images of members building a teddy bear shrine, lighting candles, and releasing balloons. However, the community’s decision to blame Kiesha’s family and then hold vigils outside their home reminisces of something more sinister. Conrad argues,

The political and social responses to child abductions and murders in different ‘communities’ are based on an implicit level of ‘contamination’ and reflect an underlying class and race determinism: ‘deviant’ victims and their families come under increased surveillance and institution control, whereas in the case of crimes against children from ‘idealized’ families there is increased parental protection and the criminalization of the assailants – the protection of childhood (sexual) innocence being equivalent to the protection of family and political order and serving

to affirm the existing and arguable patriarchal power structure. [24 p337]

Violence against children persists despite considerable investments in research and in social services.[3,6] Deeply held social and political values which position children with little power might be threatened with critical examinations of child abuse and neglect. While Devine scapegoats politicians and child protection systems for abandoning this community, this blame obscures collective social responsibility for the broader issues of poverty and racism. Disrupting imagination with rational knowledge might appreciate the depth and breadth of these social problems. However, this might also elicit despair, which, by its very nature, the human mind must avoid. While Miranda Devine’s story distances us from the pain of Kiesha’s disappearance, there are some rational minds that resist these images. In the online comment section one reader replies,

Get a grip Miranda, aren’t these “kind” people the same people who gathered to throw rocks and hurl abuse at the family last week as they arrived home from the police station? Leaving teddy bears and sobbing over tealight candles is not indicative of a caring community. They come together to gossip and give thanks its [sic] not their child whose [sic] missing.[25]

As of March 2011, Kiesha’s disappearance continues to be a mystery. The community has dispersed to carry on with their lives, and there are few traces of Kiesha, with the exception of one young filmmaker planning a documentary about Kiesha’s story.[26]

### Implications for suspicion

Responses to child abuse and neglect which centre on suspicions must, from Spinoza’s point of view, recognise the vulnerability of the human mind as an idea of the body, and as affected by emotion and the collective. News of Kiesha’s disappearance motivates a strong productive desire to eliminate threat to community safety. The liminal social positioning of Kiesha’s family leaves them open to accusations of guilt, and powerless against the slanderous utterances of the media and community. The community actively constructs a more tolerable version of events, described and experienced as ‘knowledge’. While their ideas are certainly real, they do not contain direct truths or true ideas as they might believe, and as suggested by Devine. Instead, it can be argued that Kiesha’s disappearance threatens to reveal the oppressive nature of social values of childhood and family, or the effect of issues of poverty and racism on many children. Instead of moving towards painful ideas, the display of rhetorical

images in mass media fiercely defends social values and norms. This case offers a poignant illustration of how emotion and sociability become entangled in knowledge in ways that reinforce social norms and assumptions, and reproduce social inequities.

This analysis highlights the problem of 'suspicion' in child protection interventions; specifically, the problem of basing predominant nursing responses solely in legal obligations to suspect and report to authorities. If suspicion is to be used as a mechanism to keep children safe, it is important to first acknowledge the limits of the human experience of suspicion in relation to knowledge. A new, more critical perspective towards understanding and interpreting suspicion requires integration of, and careful attention to, the necessary persistence of images that improve our sense of wellbeing; the powerful and productive nature of desire in the context of imagination; and the strong influence of the collective. By attending to the vulnerabilities and possibilities of a conceptual understanding of suspicion, different responses to children and families can begin to be conceptualised by nurses. Analysis of the human experience of suspicion in situations of child abuse and neglect may reveal patterns which, when considered carefully and rationally, have the potential to shift its light from an angle which casts shadows, to an angle which reveals the underlying structures of suspicion and their effect on nursing responses.

## References

1. Bacon F. Of Suspicion. In: Pitcher J (ed). *The Essays*. London: Penguin Books, 1985;158-9.
2. Oxford Dictionaries Online, Oxford University Press. Suspicion. 2010. Available from URL: [http://oxforddictionaries.com/view/entry/m\\_en\\_gb0833480#m\\_en\\_gb0833480](http://oxforddictionaries.com/view/entry/m_en_gb0833480#m_en_gb0833480). Accessed 18 September 2010.
3. Gilbert R, Kemp A, Thoburn J, et al. Recognising and responding to child maltreatment. *The Lancet* 2009; 373(9658):167-80.
4. Levi BH, Loeben G. Index of suspicion: feeling not believing. *Theoretical Medicine and Bioethics* 2004;25(4): 277-310.
5. Wainwright P, Gallagher A. Understanding general practitioners' conflicts of interests and the paramountcy principle in safeguarding children. *Journal of Medical Ethics* 2010;36(5):302-5.
6. Gilbert R, Widom CS, Browne K, Fergusson D, Webb E, Janson S. Burden and consequences of child maltreatment in high-income countries. *The Lancet* 2009;373(9657):68-81.
7. Sharp H. Why Spinoza Today? Or "A Strategy of Anti-Fear". *Rethinking Marxism* 2005;17(4):591-608.
8. Newton S. Constitutionalism and Imperialism sub specie Spinozae. *Law and Critique* 2006;17(3):325-55.
9. Deleuze G. Spinoza and the Three "Ethics". In: Montag W, Stolze T (eds). *The New Spinoza*. Minnesota: Regents of the University of Minnesota, 1997; 21-34.
10. Schrift AD. Spinoza, Nietzsche, Deleuze: Another Discourse of Desire. In: Silverman HJ, (ed). *Philosophy & Desire*. New York: Routledge, 2000; 173-185.
11. Spinoza B. Ethics [GHR Parkinson trans]. In: Parkinson GHR (ed). *Spinoza Ethics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000; 71-316.
12. Gatens M, Lloyd G. *Collective Imaginings, Spinoza, Past and Present*. London: Routledge, 1999.
13. Devine M. Kiesha's shrine reminds us why her name must be remembered. *Sydney Morning Herald*. 2010 Aug 12. Available from URL: <http://www.smh.com.au/opinion/society-and-culture/kieshas-shrine-reminds-us-why-her-name-must-be-remembered-20100811-11z0g.html?comments=69>. Accessed 12 August 2010.
14. Ricoeur P. *Freud and Philosophy: An essay on interpretation* [D. Savage trans]. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970.
15. Green G. *Theology, hermeneutics, and imagination: the crisis of interpretation at the end of modernity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.
16. Gadamer HG. The hermeneutics of suspicion. *Man and World* 1984;17(3-4):313-23.
17. Parkinson GHR. Summary of Spinoza's Ethics. In: Parkinson GHR (ed). *Spinoza Ethics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000; 55-67.
18. Dockstader N, *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Spinoza's Epistemology. 2009. Available from URL: <http://www.iep.utm.edu/spino-ep/>. Accessed 24 August 2010.
19. Spinoza B, ManyBooks.net. *On the Improvement of the Understanding: Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* [RHM Elwes trans]. 1997. Available from URL: <http://manybooks.net/titles/spinozabetext97spint10.html#>. Accessed 5 September 2010.
20. Deleuze G, Guattari F. *Anti-Oedipus: capitalism and schizophrenia*. London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2004.

21. Lacan J, Miller JA. Desire and the Interpretation of Desire in Hamlet [J Hulbert trans]. Yale French Studies 1977; 55/56: 11-52.
22. Australian Broadcast Corporation News. Kiesha's brother's death not suspicious: Coroner. 2010 August 9. Available from URL: <http://www.abc.net.au/news/stories/2010/08/09/2977262.htm>. Accessed 19 September 2010.
23. Kristeva J. Powers of horror: An essay on abjection [LS Roudiez trans]. New York: Columbia University Press, 1982.
24. Conrad J. Lost Innocent and Sacrificial Delegate: The Jonbenet Ramsey Murder. Childhood 1999;6(3):313-51.
25. Melrose. Comments. Sydney Morning Herald. 2010 Aug 12 9:52AM. Available from URL: <http://www.smh.com.au/opinion/society-and-culture/kieshas-shrine-reminds-us-why-her-name-must-be-remembered-20100811-11z0g.html?comments=69#comments>. Accessed 12 August 2010.
26. Liu S. Kiesha Abrahams mystery coming to screen. Mt. Druitt/St. Mary's Standard. 23 February 2011. Available from URL: <http://mt-druitt-standard.whereilive.com.au/news/story/kiesha-mystery-coming-to-screen/>. Accessed 6 March 2011.

#### *Acknowledgements*

*The authors acknowledge The University of Sydney Postgraduate Research Support Scheme's financial support for the presentation of early ideas in this paper at the Philosophizing Social Justice in Nursing: The 14th International Philosophy of Nursing Conference in Vancouver, Canada on 21 September 2010.*

#### *Contact Information for Author:*

*Rochelle Einboden, R.N., M.N.  
Postgraduate Research Student  
The University of Sydney  
Sydney Nursing School  
M02 - Sydney Nursing School  
University of Sydney  
New South Wales  
Australia  
Email: [rochelle.einboden@sydney.edu.au](mailto:rochelle.einboden@sydney.edu.au)*

*Trudy Rudge, R.N., Ph.D.  
Professor*

*The University of Sydney  
Sydney Nursing School*

*Colleen Varcoe, R.N., Ph.D.  
Professor  
University of British Columbia  
School of Nursing*