Mothering the post-industrial city: Family and gender in urban re-generation

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INTRODUCTION
DEPARTING FROM THE INDUSTRIAL URBAN PAST
Drinking espressos, playing in the sun

Imagine a short film: the camera first captures a seagull crossing the blue sky. The camera lowers and brings into focus the quintessential urban image: a skyline and busy streets. A young man drinks an espresso on his balcony in the morning sun. A young woman on a terrace finishes her orange juice. A man in a turtleneck sweater folds a shirt in a fashionable boutique. We see modern art in a museum, people shopping for exotic foods, enjoying the summer sun in the park. Children are playing. The music accelerates, we see people getting off the metro, shopping, moving. We see mothers carrying children to the playground, children shouting and running, young people on the streets at night, a barman mixing drinks, a businessman on the backseat of a car.1

The video shows Rotterdam, the Netherlands. It is a very particular representation. In this version of Rotterdam, people consume and play. Not so long ago, Rotterdam was promoted as the “work city”: a city of industry and hard working men. While these images have not entirely disappeared (although they are absent in this film), they are supplemented by representations of consumption and play. The 2011 film is part of the marketing campaign of Rotterdam. It is to showcase Rotterdam’s most charming features and to attract visitors, businesses and new inhabitants. Like many other cities, Rotterdam struggles to move away from the industrial past and into a new future of affluence, or at least economic viability.

Something else in the film stands out too: the images of mothers and children at play. Their prominence in this video is not coincidental. Children do, actually, make up quite a large portion of the Rotterdam population (COS, 2012a). Rotterdam is the youngest city in the Netherlands and one of few in Europe that is not aging. But more importantly: in Rotterdam, children and mothers play an important role in policy efforts to regenerate the city. The cheerful images of babies, children and a merry-go-round serve a purpose. They advertise Rotterdam as the place to raise children, as the place for children to grow up and become the next generation of Rotterdammers.

Mothers and children in urban policies

This next generation holds many promises. For government, the child is an important idea and a target for change (N. Rose, 1989). Childhood is typically one of the most governed phases in the cycle of life. Children are traditionally thought of as innocent and open. They can be a “ready canvas on which all manner of social phenomena and anxieties are inscribed” (C. Katz, 2006: 108). Parents – and mothers especially – are held responsible for children and the promise they hold. If children are an innocent blank canvas, socialisation – childrearing – is to make the promise become reality (Lawler, 2000). Because of this, many contemporary urban policies aim to intervene in family life. This dissertation deals with this prominence of children and mothers in such urban policies. It departs from the observation that mothers, in particular, matter in urban policy making and the
struggle of former industrial cities to reinvent themselves. I was curious about why mothers and children featured so very prominently in urban policies in Rotterdam and also how this resulted in policy practices and what was done in these practices.

I focus on three categories of policy in this thesis: 1) city marketing, 2) urban planning\(^4\) and 3) parenting guidance\(^5\). I investigate how Rotterdam remakes the city’s mythology in marketing strategies in order to fit the desired future. And I analyse urban planning policies that aim to change the physical structure of brick, concrete, parks and playgrounds. In imagining urban futures beyond the industrial past, policy makers devise campaigns, images and buildings and facilitate businesses. But they also imagine future populations. Urban policy entrepreneurs think of populations as important urban features or aspects of urban brands and as actors in safety and “liveability” policies. And when it comes to imagining a future economy beyond industry, concerns about the future labour force rise. These concerns about the city – its safety, economy, liveability – crystallise in parenting guidance practices. I will investigate in the chapters to follow just how these are thought to address a wide range of issues and why they are sometimes presented as the silver bullet to the city’s problems. Interestingly, mothers are recognised as key actors in these policies and addressed as the primary and sometimes only ones responsible for children and youths.

My dissertation is thus built on a collection of different types of data and an analysis of three categories of urban policies to regenerate the city. The three terms “marketing”, “planning” and
“parenting guidance” are emic terms: they are used by those agents developing and executing the policies.

In the figure above, the term “parenting guidance” is in bold font. That is because the majority of my argument in this dissertation, and the majority of my research on which this argument is built, is about parenting guidance. I did ethnographic, participatory research in practices of parenting guidance in Rotterdam. I give a full and detailed explanation of these practices and my part in them in chapter 3. Here, it suffices to say that parenting guidance is organised by social work agencies and other agencies within the municipality in cooperation with schools and community centres. Most practices in which I participated were parent courses (that consisted of one meeting, a series of meetings and one continuous class during a couple of months). But I also participated in more long-term one-on-one guidance arrangements in which social workers or students in social work set out to help parents manage their everyday life and childrearing practices. The participants were almost exclusively mothers and they participated voluntarily.

For 14 months in 2009 and 2010, I took the metro, tram or bus to Rotterdam neighbourhoods where parenting guidance was organised and being done. I went along with social workers, pedagogues and student-interns on “house visits”, meant to guide mothers in their own homes, I participated in series of courses and I dropped in on organised debates and “themed meetings”.

Three emic categories of urban policy - three categories of data collection
I was interested in what goes on in the room. What happens when policy ambitions for the city enter a classroom, school kitchen, family home or community centre where “parenting guidance” is taking place? What do professionals such as teachers, pedagogues and social workers produce together with participating mothers? And how does this relate to imagined urban futures and the new post-industrial economy?

**Urban Europe beyond the industrial past**

Rotterdam is one example of a larger phenomenon: former industrial cities in the West have been struggling with their economies and labour markets since the 1970s, when industry rationalised and production was outsourced to other parts of the world. Deindustrialisation hit hard in cities like Liverpool, Marseille, Luik and Rotterdam. These urban economies were booming during decades of industrial expansion and are now adjusting to new economic realities. In a way, Europe as a whole is struggling with economic uncertainty and rising unemployment levels – especially since the start of the current economic crisis. Like urban administrations, the European Commission and national governments worry about the labour force and creating employment by attracting business and economic innovation. For example, in a recent report the European Commission urges for innovation and educational flexibility to combat “skill imbalances” in Europe. It says: “Skills mismatch is an increasing economic problem (in the EU) (...) (and this) affects economic competitiveness” (European Commission, 2012: 16). This “mismatch” between the skills needed for new economic activities and those acquired by the actual labour force prompt educational and social policies for the EU, as they do in Rotterdam. These set out to *change the characteristics of the actual population to fit the economic demands of the future*. Europe, nations and cities alike thus *imagine future populations*. While cities are part of nations and Europe (and some particularities of the Dutch context, such as repertoires of paternalism are part of my analysis), they also behave like separate entrepreneurial entities in interurban competition. Individual cities compete to attract businesses, visitors and certain groups of inhabitants in order to revitalise and secure economic viability. In the academic field of urban studies, scholars have written about this phenomenon and they have designed a myriad of conceptual frameworks for understanding it, such as – famously – “cities as growth machines” (Molotch, 1976) and “entrepreneurial cities” (Harvey, 1989). Following early examples like New York and Glasgow, cities around Europe have developed such entrepreneurial strategies. Amidst much economic uncertainty, they envision their future as an important node in international networks, as a centre for highbrow culture, as the place where sellable ideas are thought of and restaurants frequented, where young people find their path towards success and international businesses want to stay put. Local and national governments alike develop
strategies for desired urban futures. They employ Richard Florida’s ideas of the creative class and find ways to attract artists, bankers and universities. They spend large budgets on extensive marketing. They compete to become European Capital of Culture or host international events such as footballing finals or G8 summits in the hope that the spotlight on their city will bring revenue. They build high quality neighbourhoods Jane Jacobs-style, with stores, restaurants, businesses and playgrounds next to each other. And they employ government strategies to influence the composition and characteristics of their populations.

**Re-generation and genderfication**

In this international marketplace of cities, mothers matter. The next generation of urbanites is one entry point for entrepreneurial urban strategies in which it is seen as an instrument to regenerate the city. Here, I want to leave the broader context of the EU and the nation and zoom back in on Rotterdam as a case of a city trying to move beyond its industrial past.

The Rotterdam administration identifies the city’s demographic makeup as one of the most important causes of the city’s problems. Rotterdam is too poor, too poorly educated, too “black” and too “lagging behind” or so say the policy texts. For example, in 2004, the new administration of the late Pim Fortuyn analysed the situation in Rotterdam and stated that:

“The colour is not the problem (for Rotterdam, MvdB), but the problem has a colour.”

(Rotterdam, 2004a: 12)

And more recently, statements about “selective out-migration” of “opportunity rich” use a different idiom, but are similar nonetheless. “Selective out-migration” (COS, 2010) is a term taken to mean that higher earning inhabitants in the 30-45 age bracket are more likely to leave Rotterdam as a place of residence than other categories of inhabitants. And the attraction of the city for the “opportunity poor” is considered the other side of the same coin, inhibiting the development of Rotterdam. For example, in a 2011 policy report analysing the social situation in the south of Rotterdam, the authors state:

“Cheap housing attracts opportunity poor and people with a small income. As a consequence, the social upgrading of South as a whole has not sufficiently taken shape.”

(Team Deetman/ Mans, 2011: 4)

And in response, the mayor Aboutaleb stated that:
“What is at stake is the social upgrading (sociale stijging) of the people. People make the city, not the buildings. The school results (as measured in Cito test scores, MvdB) are too poor. That way, you know what the future of Rotterdam South is going to be like if you don’t decide to invest in those people in a major way. For example in education, to upgrade. (...) If you invest in children of four years old, this will render results in sixteen years. It is a long-term investment.”

I analyse the logic and terms such as “opportunity poor” in more detail in the chapters to follow. What is important here is that demographic characteristics such as education levels, age, class background and so on are quite explicitly considered the core of Rotterdam’s problems. These characteristics were of much less import in industrial times, when the harbour provided manual jobs. But cities struggling to stimulate new economies are concerned about such demographics, especially because personal and social skills and characteristics are pivotal in such an economy.

Rotterdam has struggled with deindustrialisation and the resulting unemployment for some decades now. On top of that, it deals with conflicts related to ethnic diversity, the flight of higher-educated populations and rapidly aging post-World War II modernist urban planning. Building on rich historical repertoires of urban planning and paternalist policies, the Rotterdam administration has developed a range of policies to change Rotterdam’s demographic composition in order to fit desired futures of a post-industrial economy. On the basis of my research, in the chapters to follow I show that it aims to do so in roughly two ways. One route is the actual replacement of the current population with a better suited one. The efforts to build more expensive homes, to gentrify neighbourhoods, to attract higher-educated parents with their children, to market the city to a more affluent population and to “disperse” lower-educated “opportunity poor” are concrete strategies towards this goal of replacement (in chapter 1 and 2, these issues are dealt with more thoroughly). Another route is to change today’s children into the desired population: to educate, “upgrade” (to use the mayor’s term) and invest in the young members of the current population so that they can finish school, become “opportunity rich” and find jobs in the future economy. Strategies that are to bring about this change are, for example, programmes to prevent early school leaving, after-school programmes, preschools (vroeg- en voorschoolse educatie) and “parenting guidance”. Both routes are what I term urban re-generation: efforts to renew the city by either investing in the children (the next generation) of the current population or replacing the current population of children by a new generation of better suited children. Urban re-generation as a concept is a variation on the term urban regeneration. It supplements it because it focuses on the city as a reproductive milieu, where urban regeneration usually points to material and economic restructuring. Urban re-generation identifies the cities’ reproductive milieu and the
next generation as important routes for social engineering and planning.

Related is the phenomenon that I termed genderfication. I elaborate on both genderfication and urban re-generation in chapter 2, where I make my argument about Rotterdam’s aims for change (see also Van den Berg, 2012; Van den Berg, 2013). Genderfication is a variation on the concept of gentrification. In general terms, gentrification is a process in which space is produced for more affluent users (cf. Hackworth, 2002: 815). Following this definition of gentrification, I define genderfication as the production of space for not only more affluent users, but also for specific gender notions. My research shows that (and this is the subject of chapter two) Rotterdam has tried to feminise the city in recent marketing enterprises: it launched a campaign that was to showcase Rotterdam’s “feminine side”. Genderfication can also be found in the production of “child-friendly neighbourhoods”: a set of urban planning policies in which Rotterdam aims for dual-earner families, subscribing to gender-equal ideals. The aims of genderfication and urban re-generation hence explain the families and young children in the promotional video with which I opened this introduction. And they are interesting departures from a history of masculine imagery of muscled manual labourers, high-rise buildings, and industrial waterfronts.

Mothering the post-industrial city: an elective affinity

In this thesis, I look at parenting guidance practices within this context of urban re-generation and genderfication. Parenting guidance as practice can be looked at using different views. For instance, to look at the practices that I studied in a framework of new nationalisms has proven fruitful too (Van Reekum & Van den Berg, forthcoming; Van den Berg, 2013). But when looked at in the light of a city struggling to remove itself from an industrial heritage, an interesting and innovative analysis becomes possible: one about the possibility of mothering a post-industrial city.

When I participated in the practices that are at the core of this dissertation, I soon identified a common theme to them. However different the practices were (I discuss these differences in chapter 3), they also had something powerful in common: they were all focused on reflection and communication. As a policy instrument, parenting guidance and parent courses are already a reflexive and communicative intervention: they are meant to prompt discussion, debate, thought and negotiation. But my claim in this dissertation goes further: reflection and communication were done in parenting guidance practices. I am interested in the work of doing reflection and communication. The practices were not geared towards the transferral of pedagogical knowledge or parenting tips as much as one might expect. In fact, professionals teaching the classes were often uneasy in their role as a teacher. Rather, they stressed their equality to the mothers and engaged in discussion and egalitarian conversation. This also meant that whether we debated issues ranging from food and eating to school choice and child abuse, the substance of the
practices was subject to particular *forms*. We *practiced* communication and reflection in a most egalitarian fashion. I first started noticing this when *every* meeting I participated in started and ended with an evaluation of the meeting itself. These meta-reflections were very common and soon I came to see that many activities in the courses, debates and guidance meetings could be seen, in fact, as ways to *practice* reflection and communication. Parenting guidance dealt with many issues and perspectives on parenting. We talked about the sexual development of children, food, schooling, democracy and use of libraries. But what was most interesting in the practices that I studied was not this content per se, but the *dominance of the form* in which these issues were discussed. The form was decisively egalitarian and repetitive: we practiced debate, egalitarian talk, negotiation, evaluation and observation. Mothers and teachers together practiced reflection and communication in what I have come to term “ritual-like activities” (this theme is elaborated on in chapter 6). Participants in parenting guidance practices thus cooperated in these activities and through this cooperation produced reflexive and communicative subject-positions: they open up the possibility of becoming reflexive and communicative within the situation, or rather, the possibility of *doing* reflection and communication.

By stating that there was cooperation, I by no means intend to say that there was no conflict in the rooms that I visited. In chapter 5, I show how certain tensions were pronounced or solved. The point is, though, that no matter how often and extensively mothers discussed the parenting norms of the teachers or challenged the professional knowledge with their own lived experiences, they did engage in discussions, debates, and exercises, and through this participation cooperated in the production of reflexive and communicative subject-positions. Whether a mother agrees with a teacher or not, and whether or not the teacher gets to execute her plan for the meeting, the point that I will make in chapter 6 is that both teacher and mother engage in reflection and communication, even (or: precisely!) in the most fundamental disagreement.

In the practices that I studied, the everyday activity of mothering is negotiated, but the activity itself is not exactly practiced. Mothering as practice happens in many other sites and settings. Mothers are mothering at home, in the shower as they plan their day, in the supermarket as they decide on their children’s diet. If we think of what the term “mothering” represents, we might even come up with a definition that incorporates practices of fathers, grandparents, siblings, nannies, mobile phones and schoolteachers. I have not studied these practices of mothering, just the negotiations in parenting guidance and the practices within these classes, guidance meetings and so on. That means that I have made no analysis on the basis of which I can conclude whether or not the parenting guidance accomplishes what it sets out to do or whether or not mothering practices in fact do change as a consequence of the policy practices. In its stead, I investigate a very
specific location of negotiation about mothering and *production of subject-positions* through this negotiation: those in forms of parenting guidance in Rotterdam.

The specificity of this context notwithstanding, I argue that there are similarities between the type of subject-positions that were produced in the practices I studied and a vocational ethic needed for any post-industrial economy. The particularities of the reflexive and communicative subject-positions produced there in fact show a remarkable resemblance to descriptions of what is expected of employees in an interactive service economy. I have studied parenting guidance practices in relative isolation: I studied only these practices and did not follow mothers or teachers for a longer period of time or aimed to know what their mothering practices or teaching practices beyond the classes or meetings were. Even so, parenting guidance as a practice is, of course, not isolated. It is located in a place and time where industrial production is moved elsewhere and new jobs and careers are available in an interactive service economy. I propose, therefore, to see the production of reflexive and communicative subject-positions in light of the evolvement of the Rotterdam economy towards a post-industrial interactive service economy. I think of this relationship as a *Wahlverwandtschaft*: an elective affinity between the production of reflexive and communicative subject-positions and a twenty-first century vocational ethic. The concept elective affinity is borrowed from Weber and used here as a heuristic tool. Because if we see what happens in the parenting guidance practices in the light of the post-industrial economy, an innovative perspective is possible on what is done in the practices and what that means beyond the practices themselves. It brings to light how this particular production of subject-positions is relevant to the city in the twenty-first century.

The figure below resembles the triangle above, but in this one, I use the etic terms of this dissertation: my terms as a researcher to analyse what I recorded in the field and from other sources.

**The use of theory**
My research on parenting guidance practices is informed by a body of work that is often referred to as “relational sociologies” (cf. Emirbayer, 1997). This primarily means that I focus on what happens between mothers and teachers in a particular moment, situation and room. I am interested in what was *done in practices* that I witnessed, far more than in what the different actors think about the practices or what the backgrounds of the different actors are and how these characteristics can or cannot explain certain behaviours. In its focus on situations this part of my research is positioned in a tradition that has come to be referred to as “everyday life sociology” (Baert, 1998): focused on particular situations, specifically located in time and place. But other than for instance Erving Goffman (one of the key figures in this intellectual tradition), I use the term *transactions*.
rather than interactions. Transactions are, in fact, the primary unit of analysis in this research and dissertation. The term “transaction” has an important advantage vis-à-vis “interaction”: it does not presuppose separate and fixed entities that exist prior to the situation. When the term “interaction” is used, often the actors or variables in the situation are thought of as fixed and the outcome of the interaction as the result of the different attributes of the variables (Emirbayer, 1997; Dewey & Bentley, 1949). Transaction as a concept emphasises the way in which entities and actions derive their meaning from the situation or transaction itself. Transactions are, thus, the dynamic relations and processes that unfold in situations, rather than an exchange or tie between entities that existed before the situation. That means that the actors going into a transaction are not the same as those in one. The transaction itself changes the entities in it. In a transactional perspective, the researcher focuses on the process, but also on what is produced in this process: the way in which elements that play a role in the transaction form the transaction and are altered by it at the same time. I thus think of the productions of mothering as in between people and objects involved in the transaction. Parenting guidance is not only a collection of policy measures designed by policy makers and executed by professionals and teachers. They are as much a production of the transactions of the mothers and the teacher, teaching material, children present, the coffee and biscuits offered and the language used. People, objects, the space

The analytical – etic – categories of this dissertation
and the potential endless list of other entities together play a role in these transactions and all have their influence on the outcomes. To limit my scope in the empirical research, I focused on transactions between teachers and mothers in each other’s presence (cf. Goffman, 1959), and included spatial and other dimensions when I deemed them relevant to the type of production taking place. The production of reflexive and communicative subject-positions in the parenting classes is, thus, a joint activity. Both mothers and teachers (and I) are necessarily transformed by and in the transactions that I witnessed, although I have not researched what consequences this transformation has beyond the transaction itself. I focused on the transactions and what was produced within them.

I have endeavoured to develop interesting perspectives on my findings, building on a range of sociological theories and perspectives in gender studies and urban studies. I did this when I analysed concrete situations in my ethnographic material and in the cases of policy and marketing that I analyse in chapters 1 and 2. I combined perspectives when I felt that there was something to be gained by combining them. The result is something of a mosaic of theoretical perspectives. Because of this approach to theory, the reader will not find a theory chapter in this dissertation. Rather, each chapter introduces perspectives that I found useful in thinking about the particular problematic of that chapter. Throughout the time I worked on this dissertation, I have brought my ethnographic data and theoretical perspectives in constant interaction with each other. That means that at some points, the theoretical perspectives I worked with made more sense when I looked at them with particular pieces of data in mind, or ethnographic data prompted amendments to theory. At other times, I better understood what I encountered in the field when using a particular perspective or, alternatively, needed new or other theoretical perspectives to make sense of data. I was looking, in other words, for “ah ha effects” (Willis & Trondman, 2000: 12) both ways: theory made more sense or appeared too limited when looking at it with my ethnographic data and my data made more sense or needed elaboration when looking at it with particular theoretical perspectives. What I did could be termed “theoretically informed ethnography” (or theoretically informed content analysis, in my cases of “La City” and the “child friendly city”). In the words of Willis and Trondman (2000: 12) this entails: “a two-way stretch, a continuous process of shifting back and forth, if you like, between ‘induction’ and ‘deduction’”. This also means that at some points, the theoretical perspectives I started out with needed amendments or were too limited to interpret what I encountered in the field. This was, for instance, the case with perspectives on resistance that I found, in the end, not particularly helpful to interpret what it is that mothers are doing in parenting guidance practices. In this particular instance (in chapter 5) and others, I have written of my search for a fit between theoretical perspectives and ethnography.

In the intellectual journey that is in the following pages, I looked for ways to shed light on
phenomena that I encountered, to develop perspectives that help us understand the twenty-first century city and the logics of urban policies. This entails some risk-taking in the sense that my writing of theory is not as complete as often found in theses; the reader will find no reviews of bodies of work here. I use the books, articles, perspectives and analytics that helped me understand my object of concern and do not cover the range of perspectives and sources that I did not use, as is often asked of scholars in theses and journals. There is something to be gained by this approach: rather than discussions of scholars in conversation with each other and critiquing each other, I present my own perspective in the chapters to follow: I tell the story of mothering a genderfying, re-generating post-industrial city.

The figure below presents the reader with an overview of the line of argument in this thesis and my use of theory in it. It presents the six chapters and the important concepts in each chapter: urban re-generation, genderfication, mythmaking, ethnography, translations, transactions, mediations, government, elective affinity, ritual-like transactions and subject-positions. The model also reflects the way in which these concepts relate to each other in the context of this dissertation. Moreover, I have included the names of those whose work I have used to develop these theoretical perspectives and conceptual frameworks. For instance, the term “government” is associated with Foucault and Rose and “transactions” with Dewey and Bentley and Emirbayer. This way, the conceptual mosaic that is the result of my use of theory in this dissertation is presented in a graphic way. In this presentation, the reader can find on one page the theoretical orientations of this work, the ways in which I relate these to each other, the way in which I use them for my research and interpretation of data and what place they have in the narrative of this dissertation.

Starting this research in 2008, I very much relied on critical perspectives in urban studies, feminist theory and sociology to develop my research. Perspectives based in the work of David Harvey, for example, served as first searchlights as they highlighted logics of urban entrepreneurialism (1989) and revanchism (Smith, 1996; see Schinkel & Van den Berg, 2011 for another example of my work based on these perspectives). The injustices of gentrification and urban boosterism were among my first concerns and feature – to some extent – in chapter 1 and 2 of this dissertation because indeed these perspectives are relevant to the object studied here: the industrial city reinventing itself. But I soon needed other theoretical repertoires to make sense of my data or, to confront with my data and I developed perspectives on urban re-generation, urban myth making and genderfication as a result.

In a similar way, the ubiquity of the category “normal” in the practices I studied soon led me to perspectives developed in the field of governmentality studies. Building on the work of Michel Foucault, scholars like Nikolas Rose (1989) gave me tools to analyse just what “the normal” as a
Urban re-generation

City marketing
Mythmaking

Urban planning
Genderfication

Parenting guidance practices

- Repertoires of: - Planning - Paternalism

1. - Mothering Rich
- Rotterdam

2. Gentrification
Revanchism
Entrepreneurialism

Barthes
Selwyn

Duyvendak
Boomkens

Smith
Lefebvre
Uitermark
Duyvendak
Harvey
Molotch
Ethnography
Willis & Trondman
Wacquant
Flyvbjerg

Translations
Latour

Transactions I: Mediations
Dewey & Bentley
Emirbayer
De Certeau
Scott
Abu-Lughod

Transactions II
Producing reflexive and communicative subject-positions
Althusser
Foucault
Starfield

Ritual-like transactions
Goffman
Verkaaik
Asad
Mahmood

21st century vocational ethic
McDowell
Hochschild

Elective affinity
Weber
Engbersen

Government: the normal
Rose
Foucault
Cruikshank
category is and – importantly – what it does. Governmentality as a perspective helped me along in understanding the practices that I studied, but it also has – like all theoretical perspectives – limits of its own. I supplemented my analysis of “the normal” in parenting guidance practices with an analysis of chains of translations that is loosely based on the work of Bruno Latour (1999). That way, I was able to shed light on changing definitions of “the normal” and what these changes signified. The analysis in chapter 4 is the result of this combination of perspectives.

But I was unsatisfied with the room provided by these analytical tools to analyse conflict and strain in transactions (and this is not to be taken as a critique on governmentality studies, rather as a supplement). The definitions of the “normal” were indeed ubiquitous and they did guide the transactions to some extent, but mothers and teachers alike debated them constantly and were very eager to make amendments. First inclined to view these strained transactions through the lens of resistance theories, I soon opted for an approach based on the writings of Michel de Certeau (1984) focusing on mediations of policy: forms of “making do” that alter the transaction. The perspectives that guided my analysis in chapter 6 have already been outlined above: there I look at what is done in the practices that I studied, at what it is that mothers and teachers produce together in ritual-like transactions. And I argue in this chapter that there is something to be gained by looking at these productions of reflexive and communicative subject-positions and a twenty-first century vocational ethic as an elective affinity, a Wahlverwandtschaft.

Policy contingency
However much this dissertation is about the deindustrialising city of Rotterdam in the years 2008-2010, it is also and importantly about transactions in the community centre in a 1930s built neighbourhood, in the living room of a flat that is about to be demolished, in the kitchen of a lively elementary school and in a portakabin on a playground in between large 1950s flats. I researched transactions in very specific locations and thus very specific moments of policy executions. And I write about transactions in 2009 or 2010 and between specific actors. The presence of a particular teacher or mother, the particularities of a room, the presence or absence of a blackboard, the breaking news on TV the night before and the weather are all potential game-changers, or rather transaction-changers and policy-changers. Mothers and professionals may very well come to a different transaction if they were to meet in another time and place. This is, in fact, very likely.

As a consequence, the execution of policy is highly contingent. As I will show in chapter 4, translations of policy take place between different locations of the production of policy. By this, I mean that a policy instrument that is designed in an office, or meeting of public administrators is not the same instrument at the level of the executor of policy. A general goal of “parenting guidance”, as such defined at the municipal or even national level of policy-making, is translated
to “parent courses” at the level of the sub-municipality, is translated to “courses about sex-education” in the offices of the social work agency, is translated to a discussion of birth control methods in the parent room of an elementary school. In this thesis, I refer to this phenomenon with the idea of “chains of translations”, that I borrow from Bruno Latour (as I already mentioned above).

I am not the first to note the contingency of policy execution. In the academic field of policy research, scholars are usually aware of the consequences of what they often term “discretion”: the room to manoeuvre of varying actors in policy-implementation. Michael Lipsky (1980) asserted that practices of individuals in public services determine much of policy’s outcomes. In his footsteps, many have researched how policy agents produce and also change policy at the level of implementation and execution (one example in the Dutch context is Engbersen, [1990] 2006). My research is based in this tradition and focuses on the coproduction of policy practices. It looks at policy practice as the product of the work of both the executors and objects of policy.

By no means do I mean to say that the execution of policy is always a watered-down version of policy design. But I do trace different steps of translations of policy-making in chapter 4 to show how a certain policy can transform quite dramatically and become something that the original policy-designers would have never anticipated. This pertains to the content of the policy: the issues talked about in the courses, the instruments used. In addition, I show in chapter 5 how transactions are often strained, how there is conflict between mothers, between teachers and mothers, sometimes even between teachers, if more than one teacher are present. In transactions, policy is mediated. One of the factors in these strained transactions is a sense of sluggishness and lethargy that I analyse in chapter 5. The idea of “policy-implementation” entails activity. It points at actions by actors in particular situations. But much of what I observed in parenting guidance was, in fact, rather boring, low-energy and sluggish. Sometimes to the frustration of those participating in the practice, nothing much happened.

So policy-implementation is the end-result of chains of translation and at times characterised by lethargy. Taken together, it would be easy to conclude that nothing much worth noting happens in the execution of parenting guidance. That the effect of such policies remains at least elusive and maybe, it is even futile. In discussions of social policy – public and academic – this is a recurring argument and termed the “futility-thesis” (Hirschman, 1991). In addition, many would argue that the fact that there are translations of policy means that there are perverse effects (compare for example Engbersen, 2009): the problem at which the policy is directed might actually be exacerbated by the policy, or other problems might arise as a result of the policy intervention: the “perversity-thesis” (Hirschman, 1991). Indeed, policy almost always creates unwanted results, new problems or perverse effects. And I draw attention to some of these effects in my focus on
translations in chapter 4.

Yet, the policy interventions of parenting guidance do, actually, “do” something that cannot be captured as perversity. To say that these interventions are futile or perverse is an effect of focusing on the claims of the policy designer and executors about what it is that the policy should or should not “do”. For example, to say that mothering practices do not change as a result of parenting guidance policies would be to focus on what it is that the social workers, urban administrators or course designers set out to accomplish. Much of what happens in the practices and of what they produce is left out of such a scope. In this thesis, I am not looking to conclude anything about the effect of policy in such a sense. To investigate such effects is to obfuscate all other phenomena produced in the transactions. In this thesis, I do look at what is produced in the transactions, but I look at it beyond the aims of the policy makers and executors. The aims of the policy makers and executors are part of my research, but as an object of investigation: as one stage in chains of translations. By focusing on these translations and transactions, I thus show how policy is contingent, while remaining observant of what it is that the transactions produce. In a way, the observation that policy is contingent upon situations was already built in my research design when I decided to look at transactions in particular parent classes and parent guidance meetings. But in chapter 4 and 5, I also show empirically just what this contingency looks like and how we can understand it.

That is not to say, however, that I talk about these specific locations in time and space alone or in isolation. I embed what was going on in the classes, living rooms and kitchens into the larger context of urban re-generation. The larger context of the city as a whole that is trying to redesign its future and is re-generating itself can best, or so I argue, be understood within such specific situations. Following from this starting-point, I look at what is “done” in the parenting guidance and at what parenting guidance as a practice does. By looking at these practices in the context of urban re-generation, I could see the resemblance between what was done in them and what was a desired urban future: the elective affinity between reflexive and communicative subject-positions and the post-industrial vocational ethic.

Parenting guidance practices are one distillation point of the city. Mothers’ worries about the future of their children, their running jokes, personal histories and political views enter the transactions as do teachers’ professionalism, student- interns’ insecurities, personal histories, ideals and ambitions. Social work agencies’ professional goals, political struggles at the Coolingsel (city hall), poverty, ethnic tensions, religion, sexual harassment, budget cuts and rising unemployment figures all find their way into the practices. These dimensions of the urban play out in particular ways when mothers and teachers meet with policy ambitions between them. In parenting guidance practices, much of what the city wants to become or fears it is already
becomes visible, as much as that the city is produced in such concrete practices. The city today is a fragmented one, as Jack Burgers (2002) argued. It is done or visible in local statistics, policy texts, politician’s discourses, inhabitant’s transactions, marketing videos and policy practices. The urban is divided into these local settings, these situations, or fragments, and is being produced in them. Parenting guidance practices are, thus, one place to see the city, to observe it and to see how it is produced.

**Rotterdam as a strategic case**

Rotterdam is a strategic case to study the dynamics of a former industrial city aiming for a future beyond this industrial past. It is a case from which we can learn lessons that are more generally applicable for European former industrial cities struggling to establish a new economy. Robert K. Merton (1987) stressed the importance of strategic research materials and strategic research sites for sociology. Strategic research materials and strategic research sites enable the researcher to investigate problems in a way that can lead to “provisional generalisations” (ibidem: 14).

I build on this work of Merton and also more recent work of Flyvbjerg (2006) to claim the importance of case-study research. The point is not so much to generalise my findings as such (to say, for example, that what goes on Rotterdam, goes on elsewhere in the same way) but to learn from what I studied in this particular case (cf. Flyvbjerg, 2006). My analysis of mechanisms of urban policy and logics of urban re-generation as well as genderfication processes can serve as searchlights for other scholars and analysis in other locations.

In the Netherlands, Rotterdam has been the quintessential industrial city for decades. It rapidly expanded as a result of growing harbour activity and massive flows of people moving to Rotterdam to find work. When compared to other cities in the larger metropolitan area De Randstad, Rotterdam suffers most from deindustrialisation. It is adjusting to the post-industrial economy much slower than Amsterdam (the Dutch capital and only approximately 60 kilometres away). And, importantly, this is experienced in government and public opinion as an important and urgent problem. On top of that, Rotterdam is one of few cities in Europe that is getting younger. And this, too, is often seen as a governmental problem (this is the subject of parts of chapter 2 and 3). This combination of factors (a young population and the quintessential Dutch industrial city) makes Rotterdam an excellent strategic research site to study family and gender in urban re-generation.

There are clues that in other former industrial cities, too, generations are policy instruments and mothers are an important target group for social policy meant to re-generate. For example, in urban areas in France, “parenthood” is an important category in urban social policies (Boucher, 2011). And in cities in the UK and the US among other national contexts, “parent involvement
policies” in schools have proliferated (for the UK, see the work of Vincent, 2001; and Crozier, 1998 and Crozier & Davies, 2007; for the US, see for example Lopez, et al., 2001 and Epstein, 2001). Even though most scholars do not consider these efforts in the context of urban regeneration per se, critical scholarly work does examine the targeting of migrant and working class parents as categories for policy by schools and local administrations. And the way in which parent involvement at school is an entry point for government to change behaviour of parents. These clues suggest that parenting is a category in policy in many urban settings and that a consideration of these efforts in relation to other forms of urban re-generation, gentrification, city marketing, planning efforts et cetera can be fruitful and innovative in contexts besides Rotterdam as well.

So I consider Rotterdam a strategic case to study family and gender in urban re-generation. But I find it relevant to analyse this particular location for the sake of this analysis alone, too. I now have lived in Rotterdam for over thirteen years, and before that I was raised in a Rotterdam suburb. Besides a piece of academic work, this dissertation is also a way for me to engage critically and emphatically with the city that is my home. Rotterdam, it seems, is always under attack. From analyses of why Rotterdam is first on the “wrong lists” to the dystopian images that I present in the following chapters, Rotterdam is associated many times with social problems, poverty, crime and general roughness. However much Rotterdam’s rough beauty is praised and sang about, and Rotterdammers are considered wonderful “down-to-earth” people (I analyse these representations in more depth in chapters 1 and 2), living in Rotterdam is often something you have to explain to outsiders. And in the blame-game that frequently follows the analyses of the “wrong lists” and “problem areas”, Rotterdammers or the Rotterdam population loses much too often. As Rotterdam social scientist Joke van der Zwaard put it poignantly and ironically recently (in May 2013), the logic in policy and public debate is often this: “Rotterdam is such a beautiful city, the inhabitants are a pity though” (Rotterdam is een mooie stad, alleen jammer van de inwoners)12. Besides a scholarly work about re-generation, policy contingency and genderification, this thesis is, thus, also my way of engaging with public debates on Rotterdam’s future and the injustices in current popular analyses and consequent policy actions.

When I write of what “Rotterdam” does in this dissertation – when I write of Rotterdam as agent13 – I mean the Rotterdam administration unless otherwise specified. In practice, this means that I refer to different successive administrations and many participating political parties and administrators. The Rotterdam administration is made up of many actors. But when I write of the aims of the “Rotterdam administration”, I write of the aims in formal policy documents that I analysed for this dissertation. Moreover, I include some texts and other communications (such as images, commercials et cetera) that were produced by Rotterdam Marketing (2008a, 2008b), which is a public service that works for the Rotterdam administration. There is much
consistency and continuity in how the Rotterdam administration has governed in the years in which I did my research (2008-2010). The prominence of family, mothers and children in urban re-generation efforts and the felt urgency to depart from Rotterdam’s industrial past have featured in the policies of several administrations that were designed and executed by many actors. My empirical research took place in the years 2008-2010 and the policy texts that I analyse mostly cover these years too\textsuperscript{14}. The case studied in this dissertation thus pertains not only to a particular location, but also to a particular moment in time: 2008-2010. The effects of the economic crisis on public budgets for urban planning, parenting guidance and marketing became apparent mostly after these years. I have not systematically researched policy in the years after 2010. The way in which the economic crisis translated to budget cuts and policy programmes is, thus, not fully included in this dissertation. However, some recent policy cases show striking continuities with what I analyse in this dissertation. The most ambitious policy program in Rotterdam in 2013 is Nationaal Programma Rotterdam Zuid (NPRZ; Programmabureau NPRZ, 2012). This national program is designed to enhance the educational levels, employment and housing/living conditions (woonkwaliteit) in the South of Rotterdam. NPRZ is a policy program meant to bring about – in my terms – urban re-generation. Children are the most important target group of the program, and this comes to the fore primarily in the production of “children’s zones” (original in English) in which parenting guidance in the home and schooling are two of the most important policy instruments. The “children’s zones” promises to children in the South of Rotterdam: “We will prepare you for a successful future” (Programmabureau NPRZ, 2012). And parenting guidance “behind the front door” (in part to be executed by the public services that were part of the research for this dissertation) is considered one of the most promising policy measures. Moreover, the plans aim for a more “balanced” population and the proposal is to build 873 new homes in 2012-2014, aiming for inhabitants that are higher-educated and have relatively high incomes.

There is, thus, much continuity. But the ambitions are a bit more modest than they were in the years in which I did my research due to the effects of the economic crisis. The scale on which such housing improvements are proposed is not as massive as was the case in 2008-2010 and the years prior to that. These changes notwithstanding, though, urban re-generation in terms of the investment in the children in the current population and the replacement of poor and marginalised groups by “higher income” and “higher-educated” groups still is the dominant policy frame.

**Beyond ethnicity and race**

Like all representations, the Rotterdam promotional film with which I opened this introduction left certain aspects out. A striking absence in this film was Rotterdam’s ethnic and racial diversity.
The children, mothers, youngsters and businessmen shown in the film are all white. Besides a black and Chinese woman shopping for food and a black waitress, the ethnic or racial “other” is absent from the film. This selective representation is surprising for the most ethnically diverse city in the Netherlands. In 2001, when Rotterdam was European Capital of Culture, the city chose to highlight what was called “multiculturalism” as an asset. The theme for this year of events was “Rotterdam is many cities”, and symbolically, this phrase was put on billboards throughout the city in many different languages. Ten years later, Rotterdam does not seem to place racial and ethnic diversity in the marketing spotlight anymore. Ethnic diversity is, however, certainly not left out of the scope of policy making in Rotterdam. Much has been written about Rotterdam’s struggles with ethnic conflict, racism and cultural differences. Uitermark and Duyvendak (2008), for example, argued that a particular brand of Rotterdam urban revanchism is specifically targeted at ethnic minorities and Muslims in particular; it consists of policies efforts geared towards a reconquering the city from the ethnic other. And Van der Waal and Burgers (2011) asked the question of how ethnocentrism and post-industrial job markets are related. Indeed, in public and scholarly debates on Rotterdam, ethnicity, culture and race have been foregrounded so much that at times it seems like it is all we see. One of the goals of this thesis is to examine what is going on in Rotterdam besides ethnicity and cultural conflict. My research supplements existing research on ethnic or racial dynamics with an analysis of the role that gender, age and family have to play in urban re-generation, because I think that such an analysis can bring to light mechanisms that have not been analysed before. However, ethnicity as an analytical category is not absent from this dissertation. Ethnicity and culture were meaningful categories in many practices that I witnessed and in policy-making too. But I have not started my research looking for ethnicity, race or cultural conflict. I analyse ethnicity in this dissertation when it became an important category in the transactions that I studied. The women in the parenting guidance practices were, in practice, often immigrants or immigrants’ daughters. But “native” Dutch women were part of the classes and guidance meetings, too. Participants of the practices were not selected on the basis of their ethnic background. They were addressed as mothers first and as the inhabitants of particular geographical areas second.

A roadmap for the dissertation

This dissertation consists of two parts of each three chapters. The first part is called Family and urban re-generation and deals with the urban context of Rotterdam and re-generation ambitions. In chapter 1, Repertoires: mothering, planning and Rotterdam, I present repertoires that are important to understand my empirical cases. Here, the question is: why intervene in mothering? The repertoires that are relevant to my study of parenting guidance and re-generation are those
of 1) planning and paternalism, 2) mothering practices and motherhood ideals and 3) repertoires of Rotterdam as a “city of exception”. In chapter 2, the central question is: how to depart from the industrial city of the past? In this chapter, I analyse Rotterdam’s ambitions for change and some important policy strategies for genderfication and urban re-generation. The festival “La City ’08” is analysed here, as are the “Child friendly city” plans and certain policy strategies that may be termed revanchist. In chapter 3, *Producing and researching parenting guidance*, I introduce my ethnographic cases and place them in their urban context. The central question of chapter 3 is: which parenting guidance practices? I describe the urban context of Bureau Frontlijn, social work agencies, boroughs, streets and school buildings. And I analyse policy texts for legitimations of parenting guidance policies and the logics in the design. Moreover, I give my methodological considerations for this study and the design of my empirical research here.

In part II, *Learning to mother*, I deal with the practice of parenting guidance in depth on the basis of my ethnographic material. In the first chapter of this second part of this dissertation, chapter 4, *Translations – food, knowledge and sex*, I analyse “chains of translations” of policy. To be more precise: I trace definitions of the “normal” in parenting guidance and how these definitions are translated into practices. The central question here is: What is “normal” mothering? And how is this translated into interventions? But because policy is always a coproduction, my analysis of the practices does not end with these translations. In chapter 5, *Transactions I: mediating policy*, I look at what happens with these interventions in practice, in between mothers and professionals. In this chapter, the central question is: What happens when mothers and professionals meet and work together with policy ambitions between them? I look, specifically, at *mediations* of policy: at the ways in which responses of mothers transform policy, create something different and new. In chapter 6, *Transactions II – Rituals of reflexivity and the post-industrial economy*, the final step of my analysis of parenting guidance practices is made. In this chapter, I relate the practices to the larger narrative of this dissertation: that of urban re-generation. Here, the central questions are: What do the transactions produce? And how does this relate to imagined urban futures and the post-industrial economy? This chapter, thus, moves beyond the transactions themselves and looks at what they produce. Here, I argue that mothers and teachers coproduce reflexive and communicative subject-positions and that these resemble what is required of employees in the new service economy. I propose to look at this resemblance with the concept of “elective affinity”: the reflexive and communicative ways of doing and being that were made possible in the ritual-like transactions in the practices and the twenty-first century vocational ethic are related in something like a “chemical marriage” (Engbersen, 2001).