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

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CHAPTER III
PRODUCING AND RESEARCHING PARENTING GUIDANCE
Introduction: On the urban ground

On a morning in June of 2009, I visited a parenting class in Pendrecht, Rotterdam. After the more formal education of the early morning, we (a couple of mothers, teachers and I) go outside to visit the neighbouring elementary school, where a special ceremony is about to take place. The local administrators and the manager of the school are there to reveal a piece of art that is embedded in the school playground. It is called the “Rosette of respect” and is to enhance the capacity of children to interact with each other with respect and “contribute in a positive way to the neighbourhood of the school” (so says the invitation to the ceremony). The idea is that whenever children are fighting, they can come to the rosette and make amends. The rosette is revealed while all the children of the school are in the playground singing songs about respect. Right after, there is a theatrical act of two teenagers performing a hip hop dance.

In the streets of Rotterdam, prescriptions for behaviour like this “Rosette of respect” are everywhere. The physical presence of behavioural and social norms is quite normalised. Rules for behaviour in the metro, on the bus, on a specific street corner or playground, rules for greeting your neighbours, for cleaning your doorstep and for “playing with your children”3 are omnipresent.

In the case described above, the norm of mending conflict – taught by teachers to children in schools – is further affirmed by the physical presence of a piece of art in the pavement. The use of the hip hop act was a way for the school board to reach out to urban kids and to connect to what is anticipated to be their life world, while at the same time aiming to change aspects of urban kids’ behaviour. Likewise, children are asked to play hopscotch in specially designated red tiles provided by the municipality instead of using crayons to paint their own track. The strong tradition of urban planning translates in these physical artefacts on the ground: in the pavement

![The Rosette of respect]
and on street signs. These objects are seemingly trivial. But the historic and cultural repertoire of urban planning that I described in chapter 1 becomes apparent and actualised in these tangible objects and prescriptions.

This chapter is about such concrete contexts of my research: it is about parenting guidance on the ground. Here, I zoom in on the practices that I researched ethnographically and the context in which they came about. This chapter sketches the surroundings, institutional context and policy ambitions that set the stage for my object of study: transactions in parenting guidance. In this chapter, my focus is fourfold: 1) I analyse what Rotterdam’s concrete policy ambitions for parenting guidance consist of, as these are at stake in the practices. 2) Then I zoom in even further and introduce the two cases of my ethnographic research: the Bureau Frontlijn and social work agencies in Rotterdam. 3) As a further elaboration on context, I spend a few words on the Rotterdam boroughs in which I did my research and in 4) I describe my approach to the ethnographic research that is the basis of this thesis and my methodological considerations.

**Policy ambitions**

**Language and ambition**

The language of muscles and daring that is part of the Rotterdam mythology is omnipresent in Rotterdam politics and policy as well. Policy programmes are called “the power of Rotterdam”, “The city of doing: for results Rotterdam-style” and “Action programme risk youth”. The politicians and administrators that develop these programmes use this cultural repertoire and motivate their policy choices by it, placing concrete policy measures in a continuous context. I wrote in chapter 1 of how the Dutch tradition of policy planning and paternalism also provides a repertoire for
contemporary planning. And indeed, a new ethos of interventionism and paternalism is apparent in the Rotterdam policy programmes that planned parenting courses and parenting guidance front and centre during the time I did my research (2009-2011).

When reading the programmes that structured social policy in those years, and rereading them as I was writing this in 2012, I was struck by the quite enormous administrative ambitions of the Rotterdam government. The amount of faith in policy measures to enhance parenting practices in Rotterdam (at least in policy texts) is astounding. Especially for the administration of 2006-2010, parent guidance and parenting in general were focal points. This was and is largely informed by Rotterdam demographics: Rotterdam is the only city in the Netherlands (and one of few in Europe) where the population is getting younger. Concerns about the living conditions and future of Rotterdam youth feature in almost all policy texts. These find their way in two strands of policy logic: 1) children should be protected from potential danger and risk, including their parents and 2) the future of the city as a whole depends on today’s children and therefore, investment in children is necessary to produce a desired Rotterdam. The first strand was very influential in part because of the tragic and mediatised death of a young girl who became known as “het maasmeisje”: the victim of parental violence and failing public services. This led to a range of policy measures, among which databanks and archives to monitor youth and parenting (Schinkel,
2011b). These policy initiatives are not at the centre of this thesis. I focus, rather, on forms of policy that set out to teach parents skills to become more effective in their parenting practices.

**Urban re-generation**

I contend that these practices are instruments in the second strand of policy logic: the aim for a better urban future for Rotterdam and the role that parents and parenting practices play in efforts to accomplish this desired future. Most policy programmes speak of this future Rotterdam and of the administration’s agenda to accomplish it. The education and upbringing of children is a most important recurring theme in almost all texts on social policy in Rotterdam. In the administrative plans of 2006-2010, for instance, it says that:

> “Too many children are set back from too early on. We have to change this. Rotterdam needs all talents. The city will work on this together with all parents (opvoeders: those raising children, MvdB). Together, we will motivate the new generation to connect to society and to stay connected. Rotterdam is a younger city. A city where youngsters grab their opportunities and live up to their ambitions.”
> (Rotterdam Municipality, 2006: 3)

Like the plans for the future of city planning that I described in chapter 3, Rotterdam has also developed plans for the “social strategy” of the city and its future “social quality” that sketches the desired future of Rotterdam for the year 2020 when it comes to the city’s social characteristics. The plan is called “The power of Rotterdam” (*De Kracht van Rotterdam*, Rotterdam Municipality, 2010c) and has “youth” as its primary and only focal point. It develops the idea of Rotterdam as an emancipatory space, where there is room for talent and those who are children now can become the highly educated inhabitants of the future.

> “In 2020 (…), the percentage of higher-educated inhabitants has grown. Not just because the city has become attractive for this group, but because children of lower educated Rotterdammers have climbed the social ladder.”
> (Rotterdam Municipality, 2010c: 19)

This is what I termed re-generation in the previous chapter: the regeneration of the city by replacing the current generation by a new and better suited generation *supplemented* by investing in children to become a better suited generation for the future. This social advancement of the current population of Rotterdam children is aimed for with different policy measures and
it is targeted at three different groups of inhabitants: the “strong”, the “vulnerables” and the “survivors/ those slipping away”. For the “strong”, the plan develops measures to make sure they continue to live in the city instead of moving away (I have described the anxieties of the Rotterdam administration about “selective out-migration” in chapter 2) and, alternatively, to attract “strong” young people from other parts of the country. For the “vulnerables”, investments in education and other policy fields are planned to make sure that they can find their way in the “emancipation machine” that Rotterdam wants to be: to create opportunities for social advancement. For the “survivors and those slipping away” a more repressive approach is taken to keep social problems “manageable”. Parenting courses fit in the second category of policy initiatives in which people are “stimulated” to become more “active” and become able to find their own way in the emancipatory machine that Rotterdam wants to be.

Responsibility

In the social strategy for 2020, the causes for the problems with youth in Rotterdam are not analysed, but – in a passing comment – responsibility is assigned:

“At the moment, the education levels of Rotterdam youth lag behind. They could be much higher. (...) Youngsters aren’t provided with enough foundation at home”.

(Rotterdam Municipality, 2010c:18)

In other policy texts, this assignment of responsibility is further developed. For instance, in the plans for “risk youth” of 2007-2010 (Rotterdam Municipality, 2007), responsibility for youth lies with parents, but parents are assisted to be able to deal with this responsibility by professionals in childcare, social work and youth work. Thus, part of responsible parenting is to know when to ask for assistance and to be able to follow expert’s advice.

As part of youth policies in the period in which I started my research, a series of public debates on parenting and raising children took place in Rotterdam. The series of was called “We raise children together” (Opvoeden doen we samen), thus suggesting a communal, or at least shared responsibility for children and children’s behaviour. In fact, the posters that accompanied the project showed pictures of individual children with printed next to it the role of the individuals that shared the responsibility for that particular child: the mother, the father, the soccer coach, the fifth grade teacher, the grandfather, neighbour and so on. In in the introduction to chapter 4, I analyse the subjects chosen for these debates.

But for now, it is important to note that the responsibility for youth and consequently the future of Rotterdam is assigned primarily to parents raising their children, but parents are assisted...
by professionals for this task. As a consequence of this distribution of responsibilities, parenting guidance is a policy measure that is to reduce social problems in the city and create the desired future of higher-educated, “opportunity rich” inhabitants.

**Target groups/ conceptual slippages**

When target groups for parenting courses are defined, there are many conceptual slippages. In some cases, parents are mothers, in other cases, parents in need of guidance are considered “allochthonous”, in others, they are thought of as “vulnerable” or “lower educated”. A good example of such conceptual confusion is in the policy brief “More than just language! The Rotterdam action programme for integration of allochthonous parents and women”. In the brief, the terms “parents” and “women” are continuously used as synonyms, for example when it says that:

“(Rotterdam presents) in this programme, citizenship courses for allochthonous parents and women. The goal (is) to enhance the participation of allochthonous women in the Rotterdam society.” (Rotterdam Municipality, 2005a: 3)

In the first sentence in this quote, parents and women are presented as two separate categories, but in the second sentence, the central goal of the plan is defined in terms of the participation of women alone. In other words: in this plan, parents appear to be mothers. The gender-blind term “parents” here obscures the gendered goals that are at the core of the plan: the participation of women as mothers in certain spheres of society (compare Reay, 1998, see also Bonjour, 2011 for an analysis of responsibilisation of women as mothers for the integration of their children; see also Van den Berg, 2007). In other texts, there is some conceptual slippage when “parents” turn out to mean “allochthonous” parents. In such instances, involvement in raising children is defined
as an integral part of “participation in Dutch society”. *Motherhood* is presented then as one of the elements of the integration of migrants into Dutch society, which is why, to give a concrete example, two thirds of Rotterdam’s budget for citizenship courses (for migrants’ integration into Dutch society) was reserved in 2002 for mothers and one third for unemployed inhabitants (Rotterdam Municipality, 2002), about which the alderman declared:

> “Because this way, we can prevent that children grow up in an environment without knowledge about the values and norms of our country.”

(Rotterdam Municipality, 2002: 17)

Mothers are, in such a case, an entry point into the community at large. We can also see shifts in conceptualisations of parenting and integration when the 2005 policy plan for parental support says:

> “In Rotterdam, we have the problem of parents that grew up in a totally different ‘culture of parenting’ and therefore do not know what is expected of them and their children.” (Rotterdam Municipality, 2005b: 5)

The target groups of parenting guidance as a preventative policy practice and as a form of urban re-generation are thus somewhat vague; policy texts obfuscate their own goals. However, from this analysis, specific target groups surface. First, mothers are a primary target group, not fathers. Second, what are considered “allochthonous parenting practices” and “cultures of upbringing” are considered a problem, rendering the “autochthonous” parents a neutral and unproblematic category. And third, lower educated parents are targeted. It can be said, therefore, that the target groups of parenting guidance are gender, class and ethnically specific. The reach of practices of parenting guidance, however, is not necessarily limited to these target groups and in fact often includes members of groups for which these courses are not primarily designed (I describe the actual attendance of mothers below).

**Activity – active citizenship as mothering**

Much social policy in Rotterdam is laid out in the language of “participation” and “activation”. “Activation” is indeed the term with which policy text often describe what it is that social workers do. Activity in such instances can mean a lot of things: often it is to mean paid employment, but today, activity in the form of voluntary work, of caring for your elderly mother or of being an “active citizen” is also included. Andrea Muehlebach analysed how activity was related to citizenship and certain kinds of activity legitimised citizenship in her research on volunteering in Italy (2011; 2012). Muehlebach makes the case that this logic is one of the remains of Fordist times: belonging
is related to a particular active role in society. In Fordism, this role is found in paid employment, in Post-Fordism, a similar logic now focuses on unpaid labour. Muehlebach researches volunteering in the service sector and doing unpaid care work. The women in my research are activated into the unpaid labour of *mothering the next generation* as part of and legitimation for their citizenship (I have elaborated on this theme in an article written with Jan Willem Duyvendak, Van den Berg & Duyvendak, 2012).

In June 2007, I visited the presentation of a policy advisory report to the Rotterdam municipality in Pendrecht, Rotterdam of which I made field notes. The advisory report was called “Social activation of allochthonous women” and was written by the “Sociaal Platform Rotterdam”, an advisory board for social policies. The report was based on a research report called “Allochthonous women participate!”(*Allochtone vrouwen doen mee!*, De Gruyter et al., 2007).

The researchers present their findings to approximately 100 people in the small community theatre in Pendrecht. Both the Rotterdam alderman Orhan Kaya and the borough-administrator (Deelgemeentebestuurder) Lionel Martijn are present to respond to the advisory report. Martijn responds by problematising that the research showed that 75% of allochthonous women were not interested in taking up volunteering work. He concludes from these findings that most women are not interested in “becoming active.”

Martijn’s line of argument resembles the moral logic that Muehlebach encountered in Italy. He values very particular kinds of activity and even goes as far as asserting that other activities are forms of passivity. In the advisory report, a more precise picture of “activation” surfaces:

“(We) support a robust activation programme (...) There are much efforts already taking place in Rotterdam, ranging from cycling and swimming lessons, language courses, parenting courses to activation programmes towards paid employment. (...) It is crucial to form a policy programme that matches the interests and needs of women themselves. (...) For women that are further away from the labour market, accessible activities are needed”. (SPR, 2007: 1-2)

In the research report and in the advisory report, “allochthonous women” were the object of concern, not mothers in particular. But in several instances, mothers are targeted; for instance in the “activation” programmes that consist of parenting courses. What is important for my analysis here is that policy geared towards mothers in Rotterdam often aims for particular forms
of “activation” and that this does not necessarily mean paid employment. On the contrary, as paid employment is expected to be unattainable for many women, “activation” is sought in mothers’ parenting skills, physical exercise, and volunteering.

Likewise, in the plans of the Rotterdam administration for the years 2006-2010, accessible parental support is defined as a form of “activating care” geared at enhancing the “self-reliance” of citizens and their “participation in society” (Rotterdam Municipality, 2006: 11). The special policy plan for the south of Rotterdam (Pact op Zuid) goes even further by announcing that “the norm” for youth in the South of Rotterdam should be that “Every child and youngster has a right to a participating parent” (JOS Rotterdam, 2009). If a child’s parent is not considered to be “active” or “participating”, the plan promises to provide a special coach for the child. The idea is that only by such interventions, the Rotterdam administration can prevent children from becoming the “inactive” citizens of the future. By “activating” mothers, children will be raised within a norm of “activity” and as a consequence, will not grow up to become the unemployed “inactive” citizens that the municipality worries about. Thus, concluding, “activation” is often geared at mothers “being active” in their role as mother. The idea that women should be “active” as mothers comes to the fore in the idea that “if you educate a mother, you educate a family” (Rotterdam Municipality, 2005a: 3). The idea here is that women are the key to the development of the larger group. This theory can be found not only in Rotterdam social policy, but, for example, also in international development policies and NGO strategies such as many micro-credit schemes (Kabeer, 1995; Rahman, 1999). Targeting society at large by targeting women in their role of responsible and active mothers is thus a global phenomenon. In Rotterdam, this paradigm led to a formal priority given to mothers for (in some cases mandatory) citizenship courses (Van den Berg, 2007; see for a good analysis of this particular phenomenon: Bonjour, 2011). The citizenship courses are designed to learn immigrants to be Dutch citizens. This included the Dutch language, but, as the Rotterdam brief states:

“In addition to language, citizenship is about being involved in raising your children.”
(Rotterdam Municipality, 2005a: 4)

This is also reflected in the following quote from the 2006-2010 policy plans of the administration:

“Rotterdammers in employment, that is the motto. Participating, because non-participation leads to lagging behind. That goes for the city as a whole, but for every human being as well. That is why every Rotterdamer should invest in him or herself. (...) we will help (...) but our help is not free of obligation and always geared towards activation. (...) young Rotterdammers receive extra attention. They have to be
prepared well for tomorrow’s society. And everyone raising children (from parents to teachers, from family coach to policeman) plays their part.”

(Rotterdam Municipality, 2006: 6)

Interestingly, the terminology that is used in this quote and in policy texts in general is full of references to time and speed. Mothers should be “active” and “stimulated” towards activity so that they will not be “lagging behind”. I argue therefore that parenting guidance is a policy strategy to speed up mothers. As a strategy, parent guidance aims to influence the use of time of mothers in Rotterdam. They are aimed at accelerating the pace of urban inhabitants. They aim to influence citizen’s consumption of time. For example by incorporating more activities in a week or asking them to take part in a series of classes and thus arrange their life around this schedule. In addition, this activation looks at the future. It is geared at the next generation and at a future Rotterdam inhabited by “active citizens”. The theme of time and speed is further developed in chapter 5.

Policy Practices: Bureau Frontlijn and Social Work

So how did these ambitions of “activity”, “participation” and “emancipation” translate to actual practices? What was done in practice with these policy goals? I have researched these translations in two types of policy practices in Rotterdam: the programmes of Bureau Frontlijn and parenting courses of social work.

Bureau Frontlijn: Innovation vis-à-vis mainstream policy

The first setting in which I did the ethnographic research for this project was Bureau Frontlijn (which translates literally as Bureau Frontline). In the Rotterdam field of social work, Frontlijn occupies a unique position. The bureau was put in place in 2006 by the Rotterdam government precisely to create innovative policy practices. It is the invention of Barend Rombout, an ex-police officer and policy critic. I first encountered Rombout in a meeting for an entirely different research project that was to deal with Antillean inhabitants of Rotterdam in 2004. The purpose of this meeting at the time was to deliberate the position of Antilleans in Rotterdam “integrally”. In practice, this meant that representatives of different services and local organisations were present at this meeting to discuss what should be done about urban problems that were deemed to be especially salient in Antillean groups of inhabitants. I was at the meeting as a research assistant to a project that was to evaluate the city’s efforts to deal with these problems. I was not involved in the conversation, but took notes. I remember distinctly the way in which Rombout intervened in other people’s presentations on the subject rather aggressively and angrily, arguing that the other people present had no “real” sense of the severity of problems that, according to him, Antilleans in
Rotterdam dealt with. I recount this anecdote (I have no fieldwork notes of this meeting) because this way, I introduce you to Rombout the way I was introduced to him and it shows his sense of urgency for dealing with urban problems.

At the time, Bureau Frontlijn did not exist yet. But it was a time in Rotterdam for innovative approaches because in the landslide elections of 2002, Pim Fortuyn’s populist party Leefbaar Rotterdam was elected into the local government (Noordegraaf & Vermeulen, 2010; Noordegraaf, 2008; Uitermark & Duyvendak, 2008). Leefbaar Rotterdam’s claim was to fundamentally challenge the establishment in Rotterdam politics and government and to, alternatively, really solve Rotterdam’s problems. In this political climate, Rombout was heralded as the one to come up with innovative forms of policy “from the ground up” (Bureau Frontlijn, 2009) that went beyond well-established paths of policy intervention.

Initially, Rombout set out to do this in the field of safety policies. But soon, he included many other fields into his programmes. Formally founded in 2006 as a bureau within the municipality Rotterdam, Frontlijn’s mission is to come up with “new solutions” for problems in “lagging behind neighbourhoods”8. This aim for innovation is one of its crucial features. The “Intervention Teams” that I wrote of in the previous chapter (and: Schinkel & Van den Berg, 2011), were Frontlijn’s main focus point in the first years. Frontlijn’s innovation ideally comes “from below”, “from the ground up”. The idea is that innovation in social policy is best when it comes from insight into practices in the metaphorical “line of fire” or the “urban jungle” (Hartman & Tops, 2005: 20; for theoretical perspectives on Frontlijn policy innovation in Rotterdam also see: Tops, 2007). While causing irritation with many politicians, social workers and civil servants in Rotterdam because of these claims, the Rotterdam administration at the time celebrated and embraced Rombout and his projects, for instance when the City Council awarded the Intervention Teams a prize for innovative policy practices, the ‘Get Cracking Award’ (Aanpak Prijs) (Engbersen et al., 2005: 102). Notwithstanding this institutional embrace, Rombout remained an angry critic of much of Rotterdam’s policies and – at least rhetorically – Frontlijn remained somewhat outside of mainstream policy making.

As Frontlijn grew and expanded, policy innovation in itself became less and less the primary concern. In their mission statement it still is (at the time I am writing this, 2012)9, but increasingly, Frontlijn directly intervenes in the lives of Rotterdam citizens to solve their problems and enhance citizen’s problem-solving abilities. The idea is that Frontlijn listens to citizens and their perspective first hand and because of this is better able to solve problems in a practical, efficient, hands-on manner. In their own words: “We go into the neighbourhoods and try to listen to people. We value practice more than theoretical models.”10 And: “There has been too much talking (...) and too few solutions. (...) That is why Bureau Frontlijn is here. Brought to life to cause trouble and show
results. To rebel against the establishment, if necessary. Because we are not here for talking and chatting. We are here for real results.” (Rombout, 2009: 10) With this type of statement, Frontlijn is positioning itself vis-à-vis established policy makers and practitioners. Moreover, it uses the masculine Rotterdam cultural repertoire that I analysed in chapter 2: practice above theory, doing before talking, aiming to get the job done. As Noordegraaf and Vermeulen argued, in the years of the Leefbaar Rotterdam administration, Rotterdam used “traditional stereotypical images such as ‘sleeves rolled up’” (2010: 522) to advocate new government interventions like those of the Bureau Frontlijn. Interestingly, almost all those executing Bureau Frontlijn programmes were female and often very feminine: the “street-level” Frontlijn employees in parenting guidance were students in social work or pedagogic studies. Behind the masculine rhetorics of rolled up sleeves are young students with neatly manicured hands and high heels.

The “Mother and Child Programme” and “Project Practice Counselling”

At the time of my research, in 2009 and 2010, Frontlijn was involved in the field of parent guidance, youth work, safety and poverty reduction programmes in several neighbourhoods. In the context of this research, my interest went out to the parent courses that the “Mother and Child Programme” provided. So I decided to talk to those that were responsible for organising this particular programme. At this time (January 2009), Frontlijn had finished a pilot on the “Mother and Child Programme” (MCP) in Pendrecht and Kralingen (two neighbourhoods in Rotterdam) and planned to implement the programme in many other areas (Tudjman & De Jong, 2009). In a first interview, the project manager of MCP explained to me how at that time just under a 100 mothers in Rotterdam had participated in one form or another in the practices. The Frontlijn manager convinced me that studying the MCP would be most useful and interesting in combination with a study of the “Project Practice Counselling” (PPC). In Frontlijn’s view, the programmes were meant to work in tandem. The programmes were still in a somewhat embryonic phase, as they were constantly further developed and altered. MCP and PPC were, however, considered by the alderwoman and some local bureaucrats one of the most promising projects in combating poverty and “recapturing” urban areas, as evident from the alderwoman’s preface to Frontlijn’s report on the projects (Bureau Frontlijn, 2009).

The idea behind both MCP and PPC was that mothers in Pendrecht and other poor neighbourhoods often lacked in “social and cultural capital” (Bureau Frontlijn, 2009). Frontlijn used these terms following Gabriel van den Brink, a Dutch professor in Public Administration (Van den Brink, 2006) to point at the perceived lack of social and other skills necessary to being part of this “bureaucratic society” (Bureau Frontlijn, 2009: 1). At the time of my research, the design of the programmes was to enhance the “social and cultural capital” of “lagging behind” mothers in
poor areas to enhance these areas, combat poverty and better the prospects of Rotterdam youth. Frontlijn set out to do this by first helping mothers with their daily lives in PPC. For PPC, students went on house visits to intervene in the practicalities of daily life in a range of spheres. The idea was to first bring a basic sense of order. I witnessed interventions in women’s finances, administration and housing most frequently, but the idea was to also clean up the house, make sure the children go to school, give parental advice and so on. The philosophy behind these interventions was that mothers would learn the skills necessary for contemporary society by watching the students, practicing themselves and by following their advice. If an initial anticipated urgent phase in which the mother lived in chaos had passed, the design of the programme was that mothers would enrol in MCP. In my six months of ethnographic research there, I never witnessed such a succession of participation. And the Frontlijn managers too, were disappointed with the amount of mothers from PPC enrolling in MCP. However, MCP was meant to complete the education of mothers and the enhancement of their “social and cultural capital” by learning mothers to mother in a classroom setting. I have further analysed the idea of the succession of PPC and MCP and the phased approach of Frontlijn in chapter four.

From the first interview onwards, the Bureau Frontlijn was very welcoming to my participation in their practices and my ethnographic research. It is important to note that precisely because of the ambitions of innovation and the quest for institutional legitimation of Bureau Frontlijn, they were very welcoming to almost all kinds of visitors. During my six months of research there, I met several researchers, politicians and policy makers on “work visit” and others looking around and asking the students and mothers questions. Both the students and the mothers in MCP and PPC were quite used to being observed regularly by policy makers, politicians and even TV crews because of the promises that these projects held to many.

I followed the Frontlijn’s manager’s advice to simultaneously research the Project Practice Counselling and the Mother and Child Programme. Both MCP and PPC focus on mothers of children below the age of 4. Fathers were not targeted by Frontlijn, even though at times they were included in the practices. Frontlijn’s focus on mothers and small children derives from their selective use of pedagogical attachment theories, theories of child development and studies of the effectiveness of early intervention. At least theoretically, Frontlijn uses the municipal administration of Rotterdam citizens (De Gemeentelijke Basis Administratie) for the selection of their target group. The idea is to select mothers of children below the age of four from this large data bank to then visit the mothers at home and see if they need help and to ask them to participate. In practice, I witnessed many mothers enrol in PPC and MCP via other routes: participating mothers brought their friends over or neighbourhood schools advised mothers to participate. Like in all the practices that I studied, the women participated voluntarily. No participants in these two programmes were obliged to
welcome Frontlijn students into their home or to join the weekly classes of MCP. In fact, explicit informed consent was asked by the students and Frontlijn’s officials from the mothers before entering their houses. Women’s participation in the Frontlijn programmes can be explained from a myriad of reasons. Most important in my experience (I have not systematically studied women’s reasons for participating) was their expectation that Frontlijn could assist them in problems of a bureaucratic nature. These problems varied from conflicts with housing associations and pressure from debt collectors to tax problems and bureaucratic mix ups. Because many citizens experience difficulty when dealing with such problems, social work students that speak Dutch fluently, can read and write and have more general knowledge of such bureaucracies, can help. This practical assistance was an important incentive for mothers to participate.

Both PPC and MCP are executed primarily by students. Besides the cost-effectiveness of this policy design, Frontlijn argues that working with students helps create an accessible approach: “Students are young, critical and have an open vision and no prejudices. They are exceptionally well suited to look ‘broadly’.” In practice, this meant that third year students in higher vocational training of pedagogy and social work executed the programmes. The students enrolled in internships with Frontlijn via their educational institutions and typically participated for a period of eight or nine months. They were supervised by employees of Frontlijn and (for the internship) by their study supervisors at the applied sciences universities (HBO opleidingen) of Rotterdam.

Frontlijn embarked upon their mission to influence mothering practices in Rotterdam with their Mother and Child Programme as early as 2006. This consisted of weekly meetings of students and a group of mothers in a classroom in a particular neighbourhood. The project aimed at altering mothering practices to enhance the development of the children and the future of Rotterdam (this link was explicitly and repeatedly made by managers of Frontlijn: their ambition was to “upgrade” Rotterdam). Experiencing the limitations of weekly meetings for the attainment of Frontlijn’s goals, Rombout and other Frontlijn employees decided on expanding their parental guidance programme with their Project Practice guidance. PPC was developed to assist mothers in their everyday lives. The MCP meetings followed a rather traditional class format. The students discussed certain pedagogical issues with mothers and watched mothers in their interaction with their children to then intervene in order to enhance the quality of these interactions. I attended the weekly meetings of the Mother and Child Programme in the borough of Pendrecht for a period of six months. Usually, three to five mothers gathered in the temporary building on the playground of an elementary school in Pendrecht on Wednesday mornings.

Mothers attended with their children and usually, four students were there to “guide” (The Bureau Frontlijn uses this term, begeleiden) the mothers. Sometimes, the Frontlijn supervisors of the students were present as well, mainly to see how the programme was working out and to see
how the students were performing. For MCP, students were responsible not only for the execution
of the programme, but also (in practice) for the development of teaching material. These students
prepared assignments, topics for debate and games during the week for their weekly meetings
with the mothers. The mornings typically started with a brief introduction in which mothers and
children were together and sang a few songs, after which two students played with the children
in one room while the mothers were in the other room, discussing diverse issues. After a short
coffee break, the second part of the mornings consisted of what Frontlijn termed “interaction
activities”. This meant that mothers and children were asked to participate in some kind of
assignment together. The students would observe this interaction and “guide” the mother where
they deemed this was necessary.

In PPC, third year social work students “counsel” mothers in their everyday life: they have
weekly “home visits” in which a “to do list” is discussed of household chores, budget management
and parenting. Here, the underlying idea is – again – to intervene early in the lives of new
Rotterdammers by helping mothers in their daily lives. PPC is not a parenting course. And I started
out wanting to study parenting courses in Rotterdam. However, PPC was thought of by Frontlijn
as inextricably bound up with MCP. Also, because of its focus on mothers, small children and
the future of Rotterdam, it did turn out to be a very good case for this research. Like in MCP, I
participated for six months in PPC (simultaneous to my participation in MCP). Usually, this meant
that I would go to the first floor of the small building in Pendrecht in which Frontlijn set up their
bureau. Here, approximately twenty students would gather each Monday to Thursday morning.
The students were distributed into duos and families were assigned to one such duo. For most of
the period in which I participated, I, too, was part of a duo with one student, who I shall call Lara.
This way, I could go along on Lara’s house visits and other meetings with members of the families
that she encountered in this internship for her social work studies. There were days on which I
went along with other students, though, depending on the ad hoc nature of Frontlijn’s work.

Usually, Lara and I went out one or two times a day to a meeting. In between these meetings,
we hung out in the large room in the office. Besides this room, there were two computer rooms:
one for the supervisors and management and one for the students. Students competed for a place
at the computer desks because there were at least twice as many students than computers. As part
of Bureau Frontlijn’s aim for cost-effectiveness, the building can best be termed minimalistic. It
lacked not only space for Frontlijn’s workers, but also many amenities. In the large room where I
spent many hours waiting for the next meeting and writing up field notes, I met and chatted with
the other students and supervisors. On occasion, I would witness meetings with mothers here as
well, as some meetings took place in Frontlijn’s office rather than in the mother’s homes.
Social Work Rotterdam

Notwithstanding Frontlijn’s rhetorical positioning outside of mainstream policy making, it is actually very close to government in Rotterdam. Its employees are civil servants of the municipality and Frontlijn is to “answer directly” to the administration, consisting of the aldermen and mayor. The organisations with which I continued my research are more independent of politics and government. These organisations offer social work services to the local government instead of actually being part of the Rotterdam administrative core. Parenting guidance is part of what constitutes social work in Rotterdam. Other activities aimed at the empowerment, “activation” and integration of citizens are also organised by these local agencies. Social work organisations in the Netherlands are almost always not-for-profit. They offer public services and execute policies for local government. In Rotterdam, this local government was at the time divided into sub-municipalities (Deelgemeenten), or boroughs that are to a certain extent autonomous. Their administration is elected every four years like the Rotterdam administration. Domains of government are distributed on either the local or sub-local level and responsibilities for social work are administratively located at the borough-level. Depending on the political ambitions of these local politicians, certain types of social work are requested from the social work agencies operating in the borough. In Feyenoord, the largest borough of the South of Rotterdam, local
government asked the local social work organisation to provide parenting courses for its citizens. In the 2010 policy programme of Feyenoord, “parenting support” was one of the prioritised policy goals. At that time the goal of the Feyenoord administration was that all “children and youths from 0 to 18 years of age will receive a good upbringing” (Deelgemeente Feyenoord, 2010). The concrete policy measure to reach this goal was to offer parenting courses and “outreaching” types of parental support. In Kralingen-Crooswijk “parenting guidance” or “parent support” was also a priority. I participated in programmes in the borough of Feyenoord and Kralingen-Crooswijk for a total period of eight months. Both organisations employed trained pedagogues and social workers, both used established teaching methods in their practices and both are employed by the sub local government. Because of the large similarity of these organisations, I treat them as one case in this thesis.

The parent courses that the social work agencies offer are most often organised in close interaction with elementary schools in the area. The courses are included in school programmes for parent involvement. Many schools in Rotterdam have a special parent room. Parents can come into this room right after they have brought their children to school to have a cup of coffee and chat. The coffee is provided by the parent consultant, who is employed by the school. Parent consultants make sure that the room is cosy and welcoming, make coffee, talk to parents and organise courses and meetings varying from First Aid classes to the parenting courses that I encountered. Today parent consultants are employed by the schools, but before, they were employed by a special fund for the creation of jobs in Rotterdam social work. Starting in 1995, Rotterdam employed migrant women as “neighbourhood mothers” (buurtmoeders, for a good study on this subject, please see Van der Zwaard, 1999). This was to, on the one hand, create employment for women with little formal education, and on the other hand create the opportunity for schools to organise accessible parent involvement activities (Stichting de Meeuw, 2002). Most parent consultants that I encountered were of Moroccan or Turkish descent. This influenced the selection of women participating in the courses; in a parent room run by a consultant with a Moroccan background, many (though definitely not all) participating mothers were also of Moroccan descent.

In many cases, the parent consultant worked together with the pedagogue of the social work agency to plan a programme of courses for parents. And in almost all cases, the parent consultants were present during the courses and participated in the conversations. Only incidentally, though, would they teach part of the class. In the courses in which I participated, this happened only once. None of the parenting courses that were offered by the social work agencies that are in this study were obligatory. Mandatory parenting courses do exist in the Netherlands, but the majority of parents are included in this form of social policy voluntarily. Parents would drop in the parent room after they had accompanied their child into their classroom, have a cup of coffee and then
stay to participate in the course that was offered or leave again. Their participation was very informal. Almost nowhere were they requested to register as a participant. Parent consultants usually did advertise a course, but often, parents were surprised to find a scheduled programme when they came in for coffee and a chat. In such a case, they would decide to participate according to their day’s schedule and mood.

The social work agencies work predominantly with well-established, sometimes “evidence-based” teaching methods. These methods are almost always designed by national agencies for which the design of such methods is one of their primary tasks. Methods are designed for parenting courses that consisted of a succession of meetings (three to six) or for “themed meetings” (themabijeenkomsten) that are more incidental and take only a couple of hours. I participated in both. “Themed meetings” were offered more frequently than parenting courses and because of this, a wide range of subjects is discussed in parent rooms of elementary schools. The most frequently offered parent courses were “Childrearing and so on” (Opvoeden en zo) and “Dealing with Adolescents” (Omgaan met pubers). These courses were designed by the Netherlands Institute for Care and Wellbeing (NIZW, now in Netherlands Youth Institute) for the Dutch national government. They are designed as preventative forms of youth policy, aiming at a “good relationship between parents as children” and “the pedagogical competence” of parents
Moreover, these courses are primarily designed for “parents in ‘lagging behind’ situations” (*ouders in achterstandssituaties*): “parents with low incomes and low educational levels, autochthonous parents and parents from ethnic minorities” (ibidem: 18).

“Themed meetings” were also based on existing, well established teaching material but these were more varying in topics. There are “themed meetings” on such wide raging topics as bedwetting, sex education, bullying and safe outdoor play. One example is a “themed meeting” named “Parenting with value(s)” (*Waarde(n)vol opvoeden*) (LOOPP, 2001). The material for these meetings was designed by the agency LOOPP, the National Association of Parental Aid and Pedagogical Prevention and consists of 2 videotapes (that were not used in the ethnographic cases) a booklet with ‘background information’ for the professional (with articles by researchers and experts in the field for professionals), a booklet with a manual for parenting courses in general, a manual for this course in particular, some overhead sheets that can be used by the professionals, plasticised cards for interactive methods, and some additional material in the form of leaflets.

I selected meetings and courses from the (quarterly or biannual) schedules of the agencies. I came into contact with the professionals teaching the courses through the agencies’ management, like with Frontlijn. And like Frontlijn, most professionals and agencies were very welcoming to my participation. I would usually telephone the professional teaching a particular course or “theme meeting” to ask if it was OK to join. Often, it was and I went to the place at the scheduled time. But quite often, the courses were cancelled, shortened or rescheduled. I have analysed this in chapter 5, but here it is relevant to note that in my experience roughly one in four courses did not effectuate.

Most teachers of the parenting programmes of social work were HBO (higher vocational training) trained pedagogues, educational experts or social workers. Most were pedagogues
because of their expertise on the development and behaviour of children. All teachers that I met and worked with were white and female. Participants in the classes were almost exclusively mothers. Parenting courses were not explicitly targeted at mothers, but in effect, fathers rarely attended. A myriad of reasons are responsible for this skewed attendance. The planning of parenting courses during the day when many fathers work was in part responsible, but also the fact that the classes were predominantly female and as a consequence, many fathers did not feel comfortable in such a female group. Moreover, the fact that the courses were predominantly organised in elementary schools preselected mothers because mothers, in practice, are the ones that most often take their children to school. “Father groups” do exist in Rotterdam, but several managers and social workers I talked to explained how difficult it was for them to motivate fathers to participate (see Van der Zwaard & Van der Kreuk, 2012). The mothers most often had children between the ages of 4 and 12, because many classes were provided on elementary schools for parents of pupils. Many also had older children and quite large families. Most of the participants were migrants or the daughters of migrants and mostly of Turkish, Moroccan and Hindu-Surinamese descent. That is not to say that the parenting classes were organised solely for migrant women or that only migrant women participated. But as I described above, parenting guidance is offered to Rotterdam citizens in particular areas where parenting problems are deemed most serious and in these areas, many inhabitants are of foreign descent.

The courses as I described them here are one element of a very broad supply of parenting guidance in Rotterdam. The social work organisation in Feyenoord, for example, also offers special courses for teen mothers and parents with children with ADD. And other organisations offer obligatory parent guidance for parents of delinquent children or parent coaches for parents with severe problems themselves. In fact, there is such a wide variety of parent guidance that at times it was difficult to discern the positioning of the parent courses that I researched in this particular field. In short, the parent courses of the social work agencies that I research are a type of accessible parent guidance that is considered as part of preventative youth policies. Parents can participate as they like whether they experience trouble with raising their children or not. As such, these courses are the type of parenting guidance that reaches most Rotterdam parents quantitatively. I have not made an exhaustive inventory of the quantity of the offered courses nor of the amount of parents participating. But an indication is that in Kralingen-Crooswijk, according to the agency with which I worked, in 2010, 113 parents participated in courses and another 291 participated in “themed meetings”13. And in Feyenoord, in the months January, February and March of 2009, the social work agency offered 10 parent courses and 51 “themed meetings”14.
Locations: Pendrecht, Feyenoord, Kralingen

Pendrecht

Most of my research with Bureau Frontlijn was located in Pendrecht. Pendrecht was built in the 1950s when Rotterdam was in need of relatively cheap housing for families after the World War II bombings. The 1950s promotional booklet that I referred to in chapter 2 celebrates the new neighbourhoods like Pendrecht for their “space and air”. Large quantities of houses were built here in a relatively short period of time. Pendrecht offered relatively cheap rental housing for families. It is a typical “garden city”, a suburban type living space and a result of the 1950s urban zoning that separated working and living.

Towards the end of the millennium, many people left Pendrecht and the neighbourhood deteriorated in the eyes of citizens and policy makers alike. At the time of my research, Pendrecht had just been included in a list of neighbourhoods that needed special attention from the national government in their Big Cities Policies (the so-called Vogelaarswijken). In fact, it was considered by the national government as the second worst neighbourhood in the country. This judgment was based on a number of indicators like income of inhabitants, employment figures, quality of housing educational levels and “liveability” indicators (Dutch parliament, 2006-2007). Besides investments in social work and education, Pendrecht is one of the primary sites for government-led gentrification in Rotterdam. Apartment blocks were taken down and new family homes built from 2000 onwards. In addition, Pendrecht started a marketing campaign of its own, to highlight all positive aspects of the neighbourhood: “Pendrecht is goed bezig!” which translates as “Pendrecht is on the right track!”. This is evident in the streets of Pendrecht primarily because of the large banners displaying Pendrecht residents that are celebrated as neighbourhood “heroes”.

Some of the parents that participated in Frontlijn’s programme and are in my research lived in apartment blocks that were to be demolished soon. And others lived in damp and rundown apartments for years before they could move into another home, because the housing associations did not invest as much in maintenance now they were building new and tearing down the old. Given this particular situation, it is no surprise that one of the primary concerns for mothers participating in Frontlijn’s programme was their housing and how Frontlijn’s students could help them move soon.

Feyenoord

Feyenoord is the largest borough in the South of Rotterdam. Approximately 70,000 people lived in Feyenoord in 2010 (COS, 2012b). Several neighbourhoods in Feyenoord were listed for the Dutch Big Cities Policies like Pendrecht. For example, Bloemhof (one of the neighbourhoods in my research), was listed as the fourth worst neighbourhoods in the country. Bloemhof is a pre-
war neighbourhood with (in part) very small housing that was part of socialist concrete housing projects of the second decade of the twentieth century (like de Kiefhoek). And today still, Bloemhof is a relatively poor neighbourhood with small rented housing.

The neighbourhood Feyenoord (which is part of the wider borough Feyenoord) is also pre-war. It was built to accommodate large groups of immigrants from the Dutch Southern provinces at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century as a result of the success of the Rotterdam harbour. It is structured around several small harbours and bordered by the river Maas. Some of the streets are recently renovated and consist of the old turn-of-the-century build. But much of the housing in Feyenoord is the result of the 1980s regeneration efforts, or stadsvernieuwing: grey brick rectangular buildings. From some of the streets here, you can still see the Unilever factories.

Kralingen-West
Kralingen-West is the only neighbourhood in my research that is in the North of Rotterdam. It is very different from Feyenoord and Pendrecht, particularly because this part of Rotterdam was not originally built to accommodate labourers in the harbour or post-war families. It neighbours one of richest neighbourhoods in the city and the country: Kralingen-Oost. Large villas and romantic streets dominate there. The Erasmus University of Rotterdam is located here, and students dwell in the whole of Kralingen. Kralingen-West is pre-war and much of it dates back, like in Feyenoord and many other areas in Rotterdam, to the 1980s and its large scale regeneration efforts. Much of the housing in Kralingen-West is rented social housing and like in the other neighbourhoods that I described, many apartment blocks are designated to be demolished.

Researching parenting guidance practices
On the ground: methods
To investigate transactions between mothers and teachers in Rotterdam, I needed to look at the practices of parenting guidance first hand. Ethnography is most suitable for this purpose and I decided to primarily use ethnographic methods for this research. Following the views of Willis &
Trondman (2000), I understand ethnography as a collection of research methods that involve “the disciplined and deliberate witness-cum-recording of human events” (5). In my research, this meant that I participated in the parenting guidance practices that I describe above. I wrote extensive field notes about the encounters of teachers and mothers. I was interested in what goes on in the room where parenting guidance is taking place. I consistently and intently looked at what happened in between mothers and teachers. The object of observation of this dissertation is transactions in parenting guidance practices, as I already explained in the introduction to this thesis. That means that unlike many ethnographers, I am not primarily interested in the lived experiences of the ones participating in the practices, nor am I looking for their perspectives on the transactions or their everyday life. Rather, I studied a range of moments, or situations, in which professionals executing social policy and individual mothers consuming these policies met: instances in which they encountered each other. The primary objects of my research are – to be sure – transactions in parenting classes, not the agents participating in them. I did not follow particular individuals (mothers or teachers) for a long period of time or get to know agents in any intimate way. In order to understand what the practices of parenting guidance do and what happens between agents in the transactions that I studied, long term relationships with either mothers or teachers were of less importance than the extensive writing up of what happened in a collection of situations.

Even so, I interviewed 10 teachers and 7 managers of the organisations that provided parenting guidance, 12 mothers that participated in the programmes of either Bureau Frontlijn or the social work agencies and 1 designer of the particular course “Growing up with love”. These interviews were largely to expand my knowledge of the practices and to reflect upon them with agents in the field. Interviewing helped me to study the interpretations of agents of what happened “in the room”. But the ethnographic research forms the core of the data on which
this thesis is based because of the above explained reasons. In fact, interview data turned out to be much less powerful in the context of this study because it always involves looking back, interpretation and individual aspirations.

For my ethnographic research, using theory as a tool proved very useful. Again, Willis and Trondman’s (2000) views of ethnography are helpful here. They write of TIME: of theoretically informed methodology for ethnography. I wanted to write of the complex everyday transactions in parent guidance, of the way in which single remarks turned transactions upside down, how the material makeup of the room mattered and how mothers and teachers in conversation negotiate specific meanings of mothering. For these purposes, ethnography provided the best methodology because of its focus on the “thickness”, or “richness” of data. But I wanted to illuminate these practices using theory and developing theoretical perspectives as well as writing up my notes on complex transactions. TIME refers to the continuous connection between theory and ethnographic data. It “is a two-way stretch, a continuous process of shifting back and forth, if you like, between ‘induction’ and ‘deduction’” (ibidem: 12).

In the room: participation, observation, experience
Access to the practices that I set out to study posed no great problems for me because I wanted to participate in more or less open settings: none of the parents were in any formal way obliged to be there and the classes were open to anyone that wanted to participate. I entered the field as an invitee of the teachers. I would first get into contact with the organisations providing the parenting guidance. On the basis of my first conversations with the managers of these programmes and in some cases also teachers, I would decide whether this particular location would make an interesting case. As I wrote above, both Bureau Frontlijn and the social work agencies were very welcoming to my participation. They were convinced of the quality and necessity of their work and were in some cases quite eager to show me. While there were individual teachers that expressed some discomfort with me being present in their classes, others were eager to get feedback from me on their teaching (which I was often unable to give them this the way that they wanted) in a constant reflexive stance towards their work.
Usually, the teachers I came into contact with gave me their weekly or monthly schedule of where and what they would be teaching and I would be, so to say, “signing in”, meeting them in the scheduled time and place. In those locations, the mothers were confronted with my presence and I introduced myself as a university researcher interested in parenting guidance. I encountered distrust a couple of times, for example in the form of further questions about my motives. Some of the time, the mothers would interpret my presence there as part of an internship for a particular educational programme they presumed I participated in to become a teacher of parent courses myself. This had to do with the fact that I often previously had met the teacher and this was evident to the mothers. In a way, the mothers were quite used to interns, especially in the case of Bureau Frontlijn. And some of the time, mothers were delighted that somebody “from the university” would want to talk to them. In any case it was obvious to all the mothers that I met that I was not “one of them”: that I was not there to participate in a course as a mother. Rather, my presence was usually interpreted as part of the policy practices that the mothers were used to.

In my research, I both participated and observed: I did participant observation in both senses of the term. I was always open and honest about my intentions and my role as a researcher. But when I was in the classrooms, I did not only observe what was going on, because I did join in on some of the discussions and was part of jokes, assignments, examples and so on. This was important primarily because there is no way of being in the room when a parenting class with between 3 to 20 participants takes place and being a “neutral” observer, pretending not to be there, or “on the outside”. And this was even more the case in the “Practice Guidance” programme of Frontlijn. But even more so: all participants interpret my being there in a certain way and this influences what happens in the room. Not participating and remaining an outsider would have been very uncomfortable for myself and the other participants and would have obstructed my research greatly. My being there almost certainly changed transactions in the classroom, but the influence of the observer should not be exaggerated. In the words of Mitchell Duneier: “most social processes have a structure that comes close to ensuring that a certain set of situations will arise over time these situations practically require people to do or say certain things because there are other things going on that require them to do that, things that are more influential than the
social condition of a fieldworker being present.” (1999: 338).

On a more theoretical note, the courses were in part designed to make visible what mothers are doing in everyday mothering practices in order to change these practices. This visibility is produced by the teachers who ask the mothers to recount to us what they do in “normal” situations. And all the mothers that I interviewed understood quite well that these courses were in fact organised because the Rotterdam government wanted some influence on their behaviour and most had previous experiences with being the object of research. Because of these reasons, the women’s responses to my participation were especially interesting. They illuminated the way in which women that consume policy or take part in policy practices relate to being scrutinised and problematised and showed me their reflexivity about this position and their sense of humour about it.

I recorded what I witnessed in the practices in field notes. I wrote short notes in a notebook during the classes and made more extensive field notes on the basis of these. I am able to use quotations in the texts in this thesis because I was able to write down (some) exact quotes in my notebook during the classes. From the start of my fieldwork, I was interested in the negotiations about motherhood that took place in the classes and this theoretical perspective informed what I did and did not write down. The data on which this thesis is based thus largely consists of text. I wrote down what I thought were relevant negotiations in transactions in the classes. Taping conversations in audio or even filming the classes would have been most interesting, but not possible. Most classes I participated in consisted of only a couple of meetings or were even organised for a single morning or afternoon. This did not give me enough time to build up a level of trust between myself and the participants to record transactions in any other way than writing. I did however make drawings of the classes and the elements in the classes. So besides text, the thesis is also based on these drawings and maps of classrooms and the spatial positioning of objects, children, teachers, blackboards and mothers.

As I participated in the field and wrote my notes, I used my more private experiences of going along with teachers and “being in the room”. In a way, I used my body as a research tool. I take my cue for this exploration from ethnographers that stress the importance for researchers to reflexively explore their own experiences in the field as part of their ethnography (Wacquant, 2004; 2008). Especially in chapter 5, this proved useful to research some dimension of the transactions I studied. But I will remain cautious of rather narcissistic story telling as associated with the most extreme examples of auto-ethnography (for an overview, see Ellis & Bochner, 2000). I am convinced nonetheless that my personal experience in the context of my research gave me insight into some aspects of the transactions that I studied. I spent quite some time in the presence of (aspiring) professionals in the field of social work and therefore my body was at least in part socialised in and for these contexts. My “sociology from the body” (Wacquant, 2004), using
embodiment as a research tool, told me something about time and power in the transactions that I studied and I have written about this in chapter 5, where I analyse the sense of sluggishness and lethargy in the transactions I studied.

But which rooms? On case selection
In the introduction, I explained the way in which I see Rotterdam as a strategic case to study dynamics of a former industrial city aiming for a future beyond this industrial past. I use the case Rotterdam to learn something about these dynamics (cf. Flyvbjerg, 2006), to develop “sensitising concepts” (Willis & Trondman, 2000). I selected the cases of Bureau Frontlijn and Rotterdam social work in a similar logic. Flyvbjerg (2006) distinguishes types of cases for qualitative research. For the case selection in this research, I distinguished an extreme case (Bureau Frontlijn) and a critical case (Rotterdam social work). An extreme case is useful to obtain information about an unusual situation that can nonetheless be important to get a central (theoretical) point across (Flyvbjerg, 2006). Bureau Frontlijn is unusual in its (above described) unorthodox approach to social policy and its position as “enfant terrible” in the field of Rotterdam public services. The rhetorics of urban re-generation were most loud and aggressive at Bureau Frontlijn: the managers, executors and students in the programmes talked of “bringing order” and “upgrading Rotterdam” quite often and were very much convinced of the importance of their programme for the future of Rotterdam as a whole. The logics of urban re-generation and the role of parenting guidance in it could thus be observed there in its most extreme form, allowing me to develop a theoretical perspective on these practices.

A critical case is of strategic importance in relation to the general problem, that is: a critical case can increase the plausibility of the generalisability of the findings concerning a practice under study. Rotterdam social work was a critical case in this research in the sense that it is the form of parenting guidance that reaches (quantitatively) most parents (mothers) in Rotterdam. It is accessible, informal and did not presuppose any type of long-term commitment of mothers, like Frontlijn did to some extent. Although I do not necessarily generalise my findings in this ethnographic study, researching practices of social work in Rotterdam allows me insight into the form of parenting guidance that is most common. Together, Bureau Frontlijn and social work provided entrances in the logics of urban re-generation and parenting guidance in contemporary Rotterdam. Both are selections of “strategic research materials” (Merton, 1987): both give insights into the mechanisms and logics of parenting guidance practices in Rotterdam. To be sure: I do not systematically compare the two cases throughout this dissertation. Rather, I look at common themes: I am interested in what logics and mechanisms I encountered in both Frontlijn and social work.
Other data: course materials

For the following chapters, I analysed the course materials that are used by teachers and mothers in parenting guidance practices. For both the practices of Bureau Frontlijn and social work, teachers used course materials, such as books, leaflets, props for assignments, PowerPoint sheets et cetera. I analysed the way in which these materials are used in the practices that I researched ethnographically, but I analysed the materials themselves as well to look for logics about parenting, target groups for parenting guidance and types of assignments provided there. In the case of Frontlijn, the material used in the Mother and Child Programme was usually prepared by the students providing the classes. In the case of social work, the course material was usually designed by national agencies (as described above). To give an example of my analyses: In the material for the course “Growing up with love” (Opgroeien met liefde), the issue was sex and the sexual development of children. Here, I looked for definitions of sex and sexuality, and also for definitions of “normal sexual development” as the category of “the normal” was dominant in the practices based on this course material. The course was developed by the Rutgers Nisso Groep¹⁶ to train parents to become their children’s competent sex educators. It was thus developed on the national level by a subsidised organisation whose first purpose it is to educate the public about sex. I used these course materials to answer questions about the production of parenting guidance practices, to look at assumptions and ideals on which they are based and to have a fuller understanding of the practices on the urban ground because material in the texts, videos et cetera are used in these practices.

Concluding remarks

In the following chapters, I present the analysis of my ethnographic observations and other research materials. Chapter 4, 5 and 6 all deal with parenting guidance practices and form the empirical core of this dissertation. In chapter 4 I analyse translations of policy and the way the category “normal” works in practice. Moreover, I analyse three issues that were much discussed in the transactions: food, knowledge and sex. This way, chapter 4 deals with what happens in the room and on the urban ground, but it does so by first looking into what happened before that: what categories of issues are considered important for parents to talk about in the phases in which policy is designed and organised? And how do these focuses play out in situ?