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

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CHAPTER IV

TRANSLATIONS: FOOD, KNOWLEDGE AND SEX
The normal

Debating the “normal”

When I started this research project in 2008, parenting and raising children was front and centre in the political and public debate in Rotterdam. Before the full scope of the effects of the economic crisis for urban government became clear, parenting guidance and preventative youth policies were in full bloom, as I described in chapter 3. I will introduce the theme of this chapter using a particular project of the then-alderman Leonard Geluk. Geluk was responsible for policies on “Youth, Family and Education” in 2008 for the Christian Democratic Party. He was very active in setting up preventative programmes for “youth at risk” and started a series of public debates on parenting and raising children in the years 2007-2009, called “We raise children together” (Opvoeden doen we samen). The debates were organised to include citizens, professionals (in the field of social work, education and parenting guidance), administrators and politicians on issues regarding childrearing and they took place in community centres, schools and the Rotterdam World Trade Centre. In the Netherlands, at least in first decade of the 2000s, it was quite common for municipalities and other state actors to initiate debates on topics that administrators or politicians deemed important. In Rotterdam, for example, the debate series on parenting was preceded by a series of municipally organised debates on Islam (I analysed these together with Willem Schinkel in: Van den Berg & Schinkel, 2009).

What I would like to highlight here as an introduction to this chapter, is what the debates were about and how this choice of issues was legitimised. I think this is relevant to my study because of the explicit aim of the Rotterdam administration at this point in history to come to a set of what they called “self-evident” values (vanzelfsprekendheden) of what should be regarded as “normal” when it comes to childrearing in Rotterdam. In the words of the alderman: “The point of these meetings was to come to a joint opinion about what we in Rotterdam think is normal when it comes to raising children.” (JOS Rotterdam, 2008: 3). Much could be said about the conceptualisation of public debate here and the way it is used as an instrument of government, but my aim is to use the case of the debates on childrearing to introduce the importance of the category “normal”.

The short report that recounts the debates (JOS Rotterdam, 2008) starts with an explanation of the reasons for the administration to initiate the debates. This is first done in the format of a pin board with short quotes or what are made to look like newspaper clippings. The fragments of texts are not actually from newspaper articles, but are visually designed to look like they represent what can be read in the papers about today’s youths. There are ten fragments or clippings, of which four are about sex. “90% of the children under the age of 12 have visited pornographic websites”, is one, for example, and another one reads: “70% of all women with Chlamydia is between the ages of 15
and 24 years old” (JOS Rotterdam, 2008: 4). Three other fragments are about the (child’s) body too: they refer to alcohol and marijuana use, overweight and appropriate dressing. On the next page of the report, the “clippings” are further interpreted in a more traditionally formatted text. The first paragraph here reads:

“The administration worries about childrearing in Rotterdam. Certain things are not going well. Children are more often obese in Rotterdam than elsewhere in the Netherlands. We also notice children going to school without breakfast. Sometimes children are on the streets far too late in the evenings. And unfortunately, sexually inappropriate and dangerous behaviour also occurs in Rotterdam. These worries have resulted in the debate campaign ‘We raise children together.’”

(JOS Rotterdam, 2008: 5)

What happens in this quote is, first, the drawing of a worrying picture of Rotterdam. It suggests that children that live in Rotterdam deal with a set of problems more frequently than elsewhere. The repertoire of the exceptionally dystopian Rotterdam is activated here. This moral discourse of emergency and exceptionality is used for the legitimation of these debates and other policy measures. Second, the quote highlights three specific sets of problems as the legitimation of the policy measures: obesity, the presence of children in inappropriate places on inappropriate times and sexual behaviour. The report goes on to discuss many more issues in the following pages, but later on, the stress on sex and food is apparent again when two special educational programmes are introduced: a programme for the sex education of children in schools and a school health programme against obesity.

**Governing the “normal”: governmentality**

In this chapter, I argue that it is no coincidence that these topics are seen as the most pressing problems. In fact, government interference into the most private lives of families and individuals has proven to be a very effective way of producing particular subjects. To study this logic and the way in which it played out in the parenting guidance practices I researched, I employ, at least for this chapter, a perspective that is inspired by governmentality studies. Perspectives that are usually referred to with this term are mostly based on the writings of French philosopher Michel Foucault. Governmentality was once described by Foucault as a collection of “techniques and procedures for directing human behaviour” (Foucault, 1997: 82 quoted in N. Rose et al., 2006: 83). Government today is concerned with populations and governmentality refers to a mentality that is to be found in modern political thought and action, a set of strategies to exercise power,
for the “conduct of conducts” (this is the frequently used English translation of “conduire des conduits”, Foucault, 1994: 237; see for a good English overview of literature on governmentality: N. Rose et al., 2006). The object of government is the population. Michel Foucault argued that the emergence of the problem of population resulted in the development of the art of government (1976; [1994]2000). The idea that a population has regularities of its own, and its own behaviour, gave rise to strategies to govern this population as a population. Through this development, Foucault maintains, the family “becomes of secondary importance compared to population and an element internal to population; (...) The family becomes an instrument rather than a model.” ([1994]2000: 216). In other words: the family is an important entry point for government and its technologies, but the population is the object of concern. The “conduct of conducts” refers to the ways in which government seeks to “influence habits and ways of thinking” (Nettleton, 1991: 100), using the family as an instrument. Government in this perspective is not necessarily in the hands of the state, but rather a product of a collection of agents, such as experts, professionals, institutions and markets. It is made possible through knowledge of populations and through the positioning of norms instead of the upholding of laws. The production of norms of conduct is a most important government technique and it is because of this focus that I find it useful to employ governmentality perspectives here for the analysis of “the normal” in parent guidance programmes.

To be clear: I in no way mean to view parent guidance programmes and other forms of social policy analysed here as techniques to limit personal autonomy and freedom. Quite the contrary. As Nikolas Rose (1989) has eloquently described, freedom is not opposed to government, but rather a part of governing, or a technique. The self and the most private are intensely governed, forming subjectivities that are free in specific ways (N. Rose, 1989; Rose et al., 2006; Cruikshank, 1999; see also Schinkel & Van Houdt, 2010). A term that Foucault developed to point at these forms of government is biopower (Schinkel & Van Houdt, 2010). Biopower is to govern life itself, to regulate bodies, birth, health, illness and sex. Biopower depends on norms. I propose – for the moment – to understand the parent guidance practices that I study here as forms of biopower and government, because this perspective will help to zoom in on definitions of the normal and consequently also the pathological.

The normal and the pathological
The debate series with which I introduced this chapter explicitly state what is “normal” when it comes to children and childrearing. Strikingly, the “normal” was defined often in policies and practices that I recorded. To produce desirable behaviour of mothers and to produce a desirable population for Rotterdam (as are the governmental goals), government defines what is “normal”
and what is “pathological” or “abnormal”, because to accomplish the first, a definition of the second is necessary (compare Mol & Van Lieshout, 1989). But norms are not necessarily followed. In fact, Canguilhem (the French philosopher that influenced Foucault in his thinking about “the normal”, 1989), proposed to view norms as propositions to produce unity where there is difference. An interesting question is then what norms and definitions of the “normal” are based on, how are these negotiated and the object of transactions? Those transactions are the object of chapter 5. Here, I look at the way in which the “normal” is defined in the process of policy-making: how policy goals become concrete interventions. Definitions of the “normal” are relevant because, in the words of Rose (1989: 130): the “normal” is to signify that which is 1) “natural and thus healthy”, 2) “that against which the actual is judged” and 3) that which is to be produced through government.

Consequently this chapter is to answer the question: What is considered “normal” in the parent guidance programmes that I researched? And what does that mean for distinctions between “normal” and “abnormal” families and mothers? I go into the content of what is constituted as “normal” and “pathological” in the practices that I studied in quite some detail. The ethnographic material that I collected enables me to give an in depth account of the specifics of the “normal” and the “pathological” in contemporary government in Rotterdam. The object here is thus primarily what is and what is not considered normal in the practices that I studied.

Translations
I do so by focusing on the way in which translations of the “normal” take place between different locations of government. If the “normal” is the primary technique of parenting guidance and government, translations of the “normal” take place into practices. What a teacher in a class considers “normal” in interaction with mothers often differs from what the designer of the course material had in mind or what the politicians initiating the course programmes aim for. That does not mean, however, that these actors necessarily disagree on what is normal. Disagreement on policy goals is frequent, but what I am after here is how a goal gets translated into another form. What do policy goals and necessarily abstract ambitions end up like? To understand this dynamic in parenting guidance practices, I focus on chains of translations of the normal, using an analysis that is inspired by Bruno Latour’s concept of translation.

Latour uses the term translations in his study of science. In his book “Pandora’s Hope” (1999), for example, he joins a research expedition into the Brazilian forest and savannah. He discovers that the raw data that scientists encounter are transformed in transportations from one domain (or context) to another. A chain of translations is necessary to, in Latour’s case, write a report on the forest that is based on an analysis of soil. Science here starts with a place where the forest may
be receding and ends in a written report about this problem, through a chain of mediated signs (codes, numbers, tables, samples etcetera) that all refer to the same issue. In my ethnographic work, I was fascinated by similar changing notions and chains of translations. Like science, social policy consists of translations of goals and objectives to actual practices that refer to the same phenomenon but are fundamentally different nonetheless. And in the context of this chapter, most relevant is the chain of translations of the “normal”.

In the chapters following this one, the type of subjectivity that is produced through these strategies and techniques is further analysed. But first, I focus on three particular spheres of life, objects of biopower and government that came up in my ethnographic research as especially salient: food, knowledge and sex. In all three domains, the “normal” is made explicit as it is translated.

**Food**

Eating is a daily routine in families. Because of this, food provides an excellent entry point for government to a range of aspects of life. Talking about food and “guiding” eating routines is an extremely powerful tool for government because all mothers (at least all mothers I encountered in my fieldwork) agree that they should want “the best” for their children when it comes to food and, consequently, most mothers are quite eager to discuss just what “the best” is with professionals and other mothers.

Food is one of the first issues that a mother – and a mother-to-be – receives advice on. Campaigns to keep pregnant women from consuming certain foods and to stimulate young mothers to breastfeed their children are omnipresent and have been in some form for centuries now (De Regt, 1984). Eating is thus from the conception on one of the most heavily governed aspects of life. Children are often conceptualised as the bearers of needs (Lawler, 2000) and food is one of the most undisputed needs children have. In such conceptualisations, mothers are the first to meet these needs. Mothers are typically the ones in families governing food practices in gendered divisions of labour in families (Cairns et al., 2010). Families and mothers in particular are both targets and instruments of strategies of government, because they are the ones responsible for the provision of food to children and through mothers and their “food rules” and practices, children’s conducts, habits and subjectivities can be governed.

At the start of my research, I was expecting food to be an issue in parenting guidance, but I was expecting it to be presented primarily as a subject connected to health. This expectation was based on the material with which I introduced this chapter in which talk of food was connected to obesity and the general health of children and the Rotterdam population. Of course, in the classes, children’s health was an issue, as was obesity. But soon, it became clear to me that food had yet
another function: it was a relatively safe subject for professionals and aspiring professionals such as the students of Frontlijn to discuss more contentious and fraught issues such as finances and general socialisation. Mothers are generally comfortable talking about eating routines in their houses and the ways in which they provide food for their children. In fact, many mothers I met in the practices experience the provision of food as one of their main tasks as a mother. Mothers often indicated to spend a lot of time monitoring the nutrients-intake of their kids, earning them the nickname (used by some professionals) “vitamin-counters” (vitaminetellers). Because mothers are comfortable in this role, it gave professionals an opportunity to talk to and with mothers about daily domestic routines and issues that were considered problematic or difficult to discuss. Food is in this way a very private issue that is relatively easily translated into a more public one. Preparing and consuming foods mostly takes place within the home, but by talking about eating routines and kinds of food in the context of parenting guidance practices, food becomes the object of debate and public scrutiny. One of the roles of food in parenting guidance practices is, thus that of a tool for professionals. Another is that of an entry point for government.

From Maslow to dinner tables
The issue of food was especially salient in the practices for mothers and children that were organised by Bureau Frontlijn. But before I analyse translations of food in Frontlijn’s programme, I first follow the translations in policy that result in Frontlijn’s focus on food: the translation from Maslow’s pyramid of needs to policy interventions. Frontlijn aims to develop the social and cultural skills of “groups” that are (translated from Dutch literally) “lagging behind” (achterstandsgroepen). Workers of Frontlijn have written down their philosophy for intervention and working with these groups in their booklet “Growing with lagging behind groups” (Meegroeien met achterstandsgroepen, Frontlijn, 2009). In this booklet, but also in many of the occasions I witnessed as part of my fieldwork, interventions were based on the famous 1940s model of Maslow: the pyramid of needs.

For the American psychologist Abraham Maslow, the pyramid was no coincidental form. It was meant to reflect a hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 1943). In the appropriation of Maslow’s model by the course designers of Bureau Frontlijn, the pyramid and its hierarchies are adopted and altered. Maslow’s theories were one element of the programme’s philosophy. The interpretation of Maslow’s theories by Frontlijn is as follows. “Lagging behind groups” have a deficient set of cultural and social capital and this is why they are “behind”, “poor”, “stressed” or otherwise worse off than others. Frontlijn intervenes to develop these cultural and social skills, but can only do so, the booklet suggests, by first attending to the “basic needs” of the “participants”, because this way, eventually, “self-actualisation” and “independence” can be achieved. In the words of Frontlijn: “a person can only grow if fundamental needs are minimally satisfied” (8).
In Frontlijn’s practices, the level of “self-actualisation” in the Maslow pyramid is translated to the goal of finding paid employment. This level can only be accomplished when the other levels of need in the Maslow pyramid are satisfied.

“The transition to paid employment can only be made when on the one hand the household is in order and, on the other; risk factors in childrearing are minimised”.

Finding paid employment and, through this, independence is the ultimate goal of the interventions of Frontlijn. But Frontlijn and its employees argue that this can only be achieved when basic needs are satisfied. So in this translation, they adopt the hierarchical quality of Maslow’s model. In the above quote, “basic needs” or, in Maslow’s terms “safety” and “physiological needs” are translated into an “orderly household” and “childrearing risk factors”. This adaptation of Frontlijn must be interpreted as a criticism of much policy in Rotterdam and the Netherlands aimed at “activating” people into paid employment without first addressing all other pressing issues. They use the pyramid model to critique policies that do not depart from the idea of a hierarchy of needs. The idea that intervention into the most private realms of those “lagging behind” is necessary before paid employment is possible is in fact one of the main elements of the Frontlijn philosophy. And they have translated this general idea into a new model that is loosely based on Maslow’s pyramid: the “ABC-model” and, consequently, into a phased approach to helping
“groups lagging behind”. This “ABC-model” and the phasing of interventions resembles the original Maslow pyramid but is simultaneously a reduction of meaning and an addition of new meanings. The pyramid is inverted, it is turned upside down. And in this inverted model, the element of time is added. The “ABC-model” translates Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, and then supplements it with a phased model for intervention. The third part of the model symbolises the phased approach.

In phase A – also coloured red in the original to indicate urgency – the “basic needs” are attended to and the mother (since Bureau Frontlijn focuses on mothers) is coached on specific activities in the category “household”, including, cleaning, general measures for better hygiene, safety within the home, grocery shopping and – indeed - feeding her children. When, for example, the students and professionals of Frontlijn go on a first “house visit”, they make an inventory of the household situation, using a checklist. On this list, one of the questions (for the employee of Frontlijn to answer) in the category “health and assistance” is: “Does the family eat one hot meal and two cold meals a day?” Usually, the students and professionals ask the mother in the household this question and if she answers no, it is defined as an “action point” needing special attention in the months that the family receives “guidance” from Frontlijn.

On top of that, one of the things Frontlijn employees check when on a “house visit” is whether or not the family owns a dinner table and a cooker hood. When I asked the manager of the Frontlijn “Practice Guidance Programme” (phase A) about what makes their programme different from others, he answered:
“We really are necessary as a supplement to all these other public services, because we truly work in an outreaching way. But for real. We do it all. And you know, this is precisely what is necessary for these families in which a range of things go wrong. If you wouldn’t work like that, before you know it, a professional comes to a home to talk about childrearing, while there’s no dinner table to eat at, you know? We really try to address all those primary issues.”

This excerpt of an interview illustrates how this professional translates policy goals into a practice. The general goal of making sure that basic needs are met in families, so that they can start to think about childrearing and eventually paid employment, is translated here into the presence of a dinner table within the home. Basic needs are translated into household matters, those are translated into a checklist on which dinner tables are an item. The Maslow pyramid is translated into a specific kind of furniture. And in this particular case, food, or eating is translated into furniture. In practice, this topic on the checklist usually resulted in the students and Frontlijn employees going to a second hand furniture shop with mothers to buy a family table and chairs.

Note how in the “ABC-model”, the middle of Maslow’s pyramid with the elements “belonging” and “esteem” is translated into “childrearing” practices. These are targeted in the theoretical model of Frontlijn not primarily by the “house visits” and “practice guidance” (Praktijkbegeleiding), but by the Mother and Child Programme, that consists of an educational programme for mothers to attend with their child or children. In both cases (MCP and PPC), though, the focus of food is a translation of a theory of human needs.

What “food” means in policy practices
In the practices of Frontlijn, there were multiple ways in which food was discussed and used as a tool. Besides the translation of food to a dinner table discussed above, many other translations took place. Here, I go into three particular translations: 1) food and health, 2) food and finances
and 3) food as social and socialising activity. Food and health was not the main combination I encountered in the Mother and Child Programme but it was, however, an important aspect. This was apparent, for instance, in the following case in which the students that provided the Mother and Child Programme prepared an educational morning about food including an assignment for the mothers. From my fieldwork notes:

Everyone in the classroom is given a small folder with information on food that is to be discussed today. The information is about healthy foods and what are appropriate and healthy amounts of different kinds of foods for adults and children. The student (Wendy) that prepared this particular morning explains: “what is important about food is that you develop healthy eating routines and that you eat on regular times of the day and with enough variety.”

One mother, Aisha, says that she often counts vitamins and minerals in the food of her little girls. But she also points out that sometimes, the national guidelines for healthy eating are a bit ambitious. Aisha asks the students: “are we really supposed to eat all that food, or are these norms more like a maximum?” The students immediately agree and Wendy replies: “Of course, I couldn’t eat all that is on these guidelines, I tell you! You should really look at them as guidelines, as norms to reach for.” Aisha: “Yeah, but with this issue, you know, you always think that you’re not doing enough, and I’m sure that is not what you are aiming for, right?” Wendy: “No, of course not. You should just eat stuff from each category of food in the guideline, to make sure you take in a good variety.” Aisha: “Ok. You see: I think that is a much better message.”

In this interaction, the goal of the course is to educate the mothers about healthy foods. The morning is designed discuss different kinds of foods and ideal healthy diets. It is to enhance the level of knowledge of food. The students presume here that the mothers are not yet aware of what kinds of foods are healthy for themselves and their children. This can be explained by the framing of this group of mothers in Frontlijn’s programme as “lagging behind” and having “deficient cultural and social capital”. But Aisha can hardly be said to be “lagging behind” in cultural capital because she is, in fact, at the time of this interaction finishing a Master’s degree in mathematics at the university and thus, in fact, higher-educated than the students. She initially started with the Programme because it was a way for her to get out of the house with her twin girls at a time when she was living in an apartment without an elevator and feeling very isolated and secluded to her home, she tells me later in an interview. Because the students would come and pick her and her daughters up by car, the girls got to play with other children under supervision and there were no
financial costs for Aisha, the Programme was an attractive arrangement for a while.

The transaction gets interesting when Aisha confronts the students with her doubts about the norms. Out of this negotiation in the above excerpt of field notes, a particular definition of the idea of “norms” arises: A “norm”, in this case, is not necessarily to be met entirely, but, rather, something to strive for. In fact, Wendy immediately undermines her claim about what healthy eating is when she stresses that she, too, cannot eat the quantity of food that is proposed in the norm. Moreover, Wendy, in her response to Aisha, stresses the qualitative aspects of the norm and deemphasises the quantitative aspects of it, stressing the need to eat some product out of each box.

Another assignment about food in the Mother and Child Programme is not primarily about health or eating, but about sound financial management. This is one instance in which food is an entry point into a much more sensitive issue: money. From my field notes:

After the break, the students have arranged the children’s room for an interaction activity. That is to say that in this assignment, mothers are supposed to interact with their small children and are guided by the students on this interaction. The children (all under the age of four) were given money-boxes and have to spend their coins on an imaginary market. The students wear costumes to pretend they are the salesmen on the market, selling fruits they bought earlier at the supermarket. The point of the assignment is that the mothers guide the children and that the children develop an economic sense. Most children hardly understand the activity, although they enjoy walking around the students in funny dress and playing with their coins. The mothers try hard to make their children understand what the purpose of the assignment is. After the assignment is over, the students want to evaluate with the mothers: “Did you enjoy buying all that fruit?” “What you will have noticed is that buying fruit doesn’t have to be so expensive. But eating fruits is very healthy. You know, because these bananas cost 2 euros.”
Many of the women in the Bureau Frontlijn programmes are participating because they agreed on needing help when it comes to their finances. Money is therefore a recurring theme. In the Frontlijn theory, money problems should be dealt with in phase A of the ABC model and indeed, the protocols for “house visits” in the “Practice Guidance” part of the programme focus heavily on the financial organisation of a household; the students write letters to debt collectors and try to help the mothers to spend according to their budget. In fact, “guidance” with grocery shopping is a standard part of the programme.

In the above example of the Mother and Child Programme, indeed, money issues were connected to healthy eating to put financial soundness on the agenda once more. The translation here is from basic needs, to a focus on food and eating, to a discussion of financial soundness. This final translation is made possible through the translation of food into buying food and from buying food into an economic sense; in the last quote in the above excerpt of my field notes, the aspiring-professional points out to the mothers how eating right and not spending too much money can go together.

Strikingly, the students tried to do so by teaching the children about money and what it is like to spend it. With the children being too small to fully understand the game they were playing, the message is primarily communicated to the mothers and ironically denying the fact that a healthy diet is, in fact, often quite expensive.

Sometimes food is translated into sociability and correct socialisation. I recorded the following example in my field notes. Following the discussions that I analysed above between Aisha and Wendy, later that morning, Wendy goes into other aspects of eating:

“Normal is that you as a mother decide on what times during the day you eat. Your child may decide how much it eats. It is really not a good idea for you to punish your child for not eating. But you can stimulate your child and invite him or her to eat. What is really important when it comes to eating is structure and routine (regelmaat).
Here, talking about food and eating is to address power balances (or perceived imbalances) in the home, general daily structures and the production of homeliness and a generally nurturing environment for children. In this instance, a very clear definition is given of what is “normal”. And in this case, “normal” does not pertain to the quality or quantity of food itself, but, instead, to the power balance between mother and child because, as Wendy says, it is “normal” for mothers to have the power to decide when to eat. Structure and routine and a clear distribution of power within the home are elements of “the normal” in this case.

The translation from food and eating practices to filling out a form

Here, the normal is translated into a particular idea of an appropriate power balance in the home, and this idea is further translated into a form that the mothers were to fill out. The form asked questions about when, how and how much was eaten in the homes of the women and was designed to help the women reflect on their habits. At the end of the chain of translations, the “normal” can be found in a form to fill out.

Another concrete norm for the structure of family life that is linked to food is television watching. Professionals communicate often that TV is something to limit. Besides the interpretation of television as not sufficiently educational, many professionals indicated to parents that TV obstructs a homely and truly social family life. When children have trouble eating and mothers experience power struggles with their children over food, the most common advice of professionals is to try to make the activity of eating more sociable, for example by setting a “nice looking” table. In the next excerpt, the students of Frontlijn have given the mothers homework: to try to eat with their children without turning the TV on.

Denise (one of the students) asks: “So, Barbara, tell us how it went, eating without your TV on?” Barbara replies: “Well, for the children, it really doesn't matter. They find something else to do while they are eating. It is very quiet in the house, though, without the TV on. That's strange to me. You start listening to everything.” Denise asks: “And how do you think this works out for the development of your child?” Barbara shrugs and looks at the other mothers.
In this interaction, the norm that the students communicate is that eating should be done together, as a family, without TV watching. Eating is thus defined as a social activity. The end of the chain of translations here is the homework assignment to eat without the TV on.

Barbara did her homework this week, but immediately stresses that turning off the TV did not mean that she and the children engaged in conversation or some other form of activity together besides eating. Instead, the children found “something else to do”. Denise seems pleased that Barbara did the assignment and wants to further stress the benefits of turning off the TV and eating together by asking Barbara the direct question in what way she thinks this produces benefits for the development of her children. Barbara does not have an answer to this question, underlining the distance between the student’s aspirations of optimal child development and Barbara’s everyday experience of raising children.

**Classed food, governing eating behaviour**

*The path to democracy begins in the kitchen of the sensitive mother.*

Walkerdine & Lucey, 1989: 101

This distinction between Barbara and the students is typical for the way in which food practices produce difference. Food is the “symbolic medium par excellance” (Morse, 1994: 95, quoted in O’Connell, 2010) for boundary work. Children are typically disciplined (O’Connell, 2010) or civilised (Elias, [1939] 2011) through eating practices and this explains the importance of food and eating beyond health issues for parent guidance programmes like Frontlijn’s. Food practices and taste preference have long been established in sociology and anthropology to be markers of (class) difference (Douglas, 1975; Bourdieu, 1996). As I have shown above, the parenting classes that deal with food are meant to produce much more than healthy children and citizens alone. In chapter 6, I go into the type of subject-positions that are produced in parenting guidance practices, but here, I stress the way in which food classes are *classed* and how food is an entry point for government.
Frontlijn’s practices result in a validation of middle class practices, while pathologising lower class ones (compare Walkerdine & Lucey, 1989: 22). The “normal” is translated to eating at a table, eating healthy but in a budget, eating together as a family and without the TV on. These specific examples of translations show how particular middle class norms are defined as “normal” and how this necessarily produces pathology, because to mark out the “normal”, the “pathological” is necessary. To translate the basic need of children and families to eat into the purchase of a dinner table is an especially poignant case in point. In this particular translation, a very specific classed norm is imposed on families in financial distress. Moreover, when financial problems of the mothers are obstructing healthy food practices, this is effectively denied by the aspiring-professionals when they repeatedly claim how healthy foods like fruits are not necessarily more expensive than less healthy foods. Food thus proved to be an especially powerful subject to which to attach particular middle class norms about when (in a regular structure), what (fruit and vegetables, one hot meal, two cold meals) and how (together, sitting at a table, without TV) to eat and, consequently, behave in general.

**Knowledge**

Beyond the most basic human needs like food, most parenting guidance practices focus on learning and the cognitive abilities of the next generation in some form. I interpret this as a translation of the macro-level ambitions of the city of Rotterdam to become a successful post-industrial city. Many professionals and managers in the field of social work and education spoke to me in interviews of what they considered the challenge of bringing together the future Rotterdam economy and the educational levels of the population. A school manager said it most eloquently:

> “Before, you could walk over the water from one side of Maashaven (a harbour near the city centre, MvdB) to the other over the ships. That is no longer possible. Those ships aren’t here anymore. Now, in the same spot we have the “creative factory” (a building in which entrepreneurs in the “creative industries” let space for their business, MvdB). We need to take our responsibility and make sure that our children can connect to this new economy.”

Frontlijn’s managers and professionals, too, are convinced of their and Rotterdam’s responsibility to make sure that the next generation will be well-educated enough to find jobs in the new economy. And Frontlijn translates this into a particularly optimistic philosophy and set of strategies. According to Frontlijn’s main manager, if interventions into families’ lives would
start early enough and would be both consistent and of a structural nature, all children should be able to achieve at least higher vocational training (his words in the interview were: “we’ll have only Havo-kindjes”).

In Frontlijn’s philosophy, but generally in most parenting guidance programmes, the connection to the economy of the future is to be made by enhancing the educational levels of today’s children. The school manager that I cited above aims at accomplishing this goal through educating children in elementary schools in innovative ways. And in the early intervention philosophy of Frontlijn, this general goal is translated into interventions in the lives of families with children under the age of four. In fact, even in phase A of the “ABC-model”, an important translation takes place as one of the main topics of the months of provided “Practice guidance”, is a library visit of mother and child together, guided by the students. For my analysis here, a particular library visit that I accompanied is especially relevant.

Mrs Abena has two sons of ages five and three. She has not been willing to go to the library with the students until now, even though she has been “guided” by Frontlijn for more than a year. The library visit is one of the many items in her dossier that are still not satisfactorily completed, according to the professionals and students. When the students’ supervisor wants to discuss a strategy to accomplish the goal with the student that is responsible for “guiding” Mrs Abena, Clarissa (the student) mentions that she is herself not quite comfortable with going to the library, because reading to small children “in funny voices”, she says, is not her “forte” (sterke punt). Still, Clarissa is obliged to take Mrs Abena and her sons to the library and today is the day. Clarissa’s supervisor stresses the importance of this topic once more to make sure Clarissa complies.

Once Mrs Abena arrives at the central office of Frontlijn in Pendrecht, she searches her bags for letters that she would like to discuss with Clarissa instead of going to the library. She says: “this is what we need to do today, Clarissa”. Clarissa proposes to deal with these letters that concern a new apartment for the Abena family next week in the next house visit she is to make so that today, the library visit can take place.

Once we go outside, it turns out that Clarissa does not know where the local library is, even though it is within a 100 meters range of the central office of Frontlijn. Mrs Abena’s sons point her in the right direction. Once we get there, the library is not open for another half hour, so we have to wait for a good half hour while Mrs Abena complains about today’s target and tries to change the conversation back to the letters that she wanted to discuss earlier.
Once we are in the library, the boys run towards the computers. Clarissa turns off the computers so that they can choose a book and read. The boys are already members of the library and as it turns out, Mrs Abena takes them quite regularly to choose some books to lend. Clarissa has been asked by her supervisor to make sure to show Mrs Abena that a library visit can be fun. Frontlijn wants Mrs Abena and the children to read for half an hour, it says in the protocol. Clarissa confesses to Mrs Abena: “You know, I don’t like to read too, you know. I practically never read.” First, Clarissa reads with the children while Mrs Abena sits and watches them. She smiles and says when her eldest tells stories to go with the illustrations in the book: “I’m proud of my boy”. After a while, the boys want their mother to join them and she does. After exactly thirty minutes Mrs Abena says: “Clarissa, it’s enough now, right? Are we done yet?”, and Clarissa agrees.

The library visit that Clarissa and Mrs Abena are obliged to perform is a symbolic moment in which the importance of reading books, of knowledge production and of being educated is affirmed. The act marks a transition from the uneducated “lagging behind” position that the Bureau Frontlijn assumes Mrs Abena to have, to the educated, knowledge intensive future that is aspired for Mrs Abena’s sons. In that sense, it also signifies – at least for Bureau Frontlijn management – Rotterdam’s transition from a working class city to a creative, high skilled city and children’s future from one of manual unskilled labour to creative brain work. The symbolic act
here is to refer to this aim for the future.

The act is highly symbolic, because Bureau Frontlijn makes no effort to ensure Mrs Abena’s involvement in her sons’ educations or in the reading skills of the two little boys in a more structural way beyond this visit. Rather, the act is to highlight the importance of knowledge and cognitive skills for the Abena family and Clarissa. It does so by following a relatively strict format: 1) the library visit is to take thirty minutes, 2) the activity has to be reading (rather than using the computer, as the Abena boys alluded to), 3) the student is to demonstrate the act by showing the mother how reading to children is done, 4) the mother is to take over this activity and, 5) the children are to lend books. In this example, the general goal of the Rotterdam knowledge economy is translated to a thirty minute visit to the local library to read a book with small children on site.

Clarissa is asked to perform and guide this symbolic act, but expresses discomfort about it to her supervisor and disinterest in reading when in the library. The tension between Clarissa’s own position and the norm of knowledge, education and reading that is expressed in the symbolic act results in specific transactions in several moments during the afternoon that I described above. First, Clarissa is not able to find the library. For Frontlijn, she is the one to “guide” the family, but as it turns out in this moment, the members of the Abena family – notably the little boys – are better acquainted with the local educational infrastructure than is Clarissa. Once again, the framing of the families as “lagging behind” by Frontlijn obscures the knowledge and skills that this particular family does possess in this moment. Second, Clarissa’s discomfort in the act and her resistance to take part in it is expressed in the fact that she has not taken the time to check the opening hours of the library, resulting in time spent idly while Mrs Abena eloquently expressed her desire to attend to matters that are urgent to her. Third, while in the library, Clarissa expresses her dislike of reading. She thereby undermines the symbolic act that is set up in the Frontlijn protocol.

Mrs Abena, in turn, indicates her resistance to the visit early on, first resisting going at all, and then stressing the urgency of other matters to be dealt with. Both women are in the act of the library visit against their expressed will. Anti-bureaucratic philosophies and sentiments in the Frontlijn Bureau notwithstanding, Frontlijn here translates the general goal of the knowledge economy and better educational results of children into a thirty minute symbolic act that is rather bureaucratically and ritualistically handled. It is a topic on a checklist, an item to check in “guiding” mothers, a motion to go through so that attention is paid to education and knowledge without any real expectation of actual educational results. Both women express their dislike of the act, leading them to doing the exact minimum of what is expected from them; as soon as the thirty minutes are over, both agree that they have accomplished the set goal. As a consequence, these thirty minutes of relative disinterest undermine the message and symbolic weight that is attached to the act in the policy design.
The library visit is the end of a chain of translations that first translates the general goal of accomplishing a knowledge economy for Rotterdam to the enhancement of the educational levels of children. “Normal” support of parents to their children in issues of learning and education is then defined in this chain of translations as the practice of reading books. Bureau Frontlijn then translates this policy goal into the intervention of reading books with children that is then (and this is the final translation) to be performed in the local library with the mother participating. This analysis of the translation from the general goal of the future knowledge economy to a thirty minute library visit shows how what starts as a professional’s reflexive practice of translating general policy goals into concrete items for practice changes into a symbolic act that is ritualistically performed. Besides the logics of governmentality and the setting of norms, logics that are internal to the organisation of policy produce particular results. Translations in social policy are thus also the product of local logics. Professionals apply “general, scientific knowledge to specific cases in rigorous and therefore routinized or institutionalised ways” (Noordegraaf, 2007: 765; compare Freidson, 2001). In the ambiguous context in which the students “guide” the mothers in the “Practice guidance programme”, the search for concrete actions that can be derived from general policy goals leads to an “overemphasis on the highly visible behaviour” (Kerr, [1975] 1995: 12) of a library visit when the improvement of educational levels of the next generation is the general goal. This symbolic act has become the goal itself: the “terminal value” of the policy, instead of the “instrumental value” (Merton, 1940: 563).

**Sex**

Besides eating practices and the future knowledge economy, important concerns of the Rotterdam administration are about sex and sexual deviance. This is reflected in the way in which the childrearing debates were legitimised, as I described in the introduction to this chapter. These debates focused heavily on sexual issues and reflected a particular concern about the sexual behaviour of the Rotterdam population and especially its youth. This concern reflects government’s will to govern the most private spheres of life and to govern life itself. Sex is an especially potent aspect for government to influence behaviours and aspirations of today’s children and the future’s
adult population.

I was surprised to find, in the field, that many parenting guidance practices were, in fact, about sex. For Bureau Frontlijn, sex was not such a salient subject, but in the second half of my ethnographic fieldwork, in which I participated in programmes that are provided by social work agencies in Rotterdam, sex, sexual development and sexualities were recurring themes. This was the case because the physical and emotional development of children and adolescents were often on the agenda, especially in practices that were designed for parents of children in puberty. But at the time of my fieldwork, I often encountered an especially targeted course on sex education, called “Growing up with love” (Opgroeien met liefde). To give a rough idea of the prevalence of this course in the period in which I did my fieldwork: in the first quarter of 2010, six out of twelve course programmes in the borough of Feyenoord were called “Growing up with love”. This is a course that was developed by the Rutgers Nisso Groep and NIGZ (two national expertise centres/agencies for respectively sexual health and general health promotion) to train parents to become their children’s competent sex educators. The course was thus developed on the national level by an organisation whose first purpose it is to educate the public about sex. But it was offered on local level by the social work agencies in the particular boroughs of Rotterdam.

**Normal desire/ desiring the “normal”**

Sex is such a potent subject at least in part because when it comes to sex and the sexual development of children, parents themselves are especially interested in what counts as “normal”. In my ethnographic fieldwork, parents often expressed their concern about whether or not their child’s behaviour is “normal”. Parental insecurities on this difficult and sometimes taboo subject were answered by professionals and course-developers that gave specific interpretations of the “normal” sexual, physical and emotional development of children. In the particular case that I discuss in this paragraph, – “Growing up with love” – charts of the “normal” physical and emotional development of children are presented to parents in the course material. These charts are based on scientific research that the designers of the courses translate for parents into simplified packages of knowledge.

From the course texts and my data material, three specific meanings that are given to “the normal” and sex and one specific meaning given to “the abnormal” and sex come to the fore. I thus found 3 particular translations of “normal sex” and 1 specification for sexual abnormality: 1) that love and sex are connected, 2) that children are innocent though sexual beings, 3) that homosexuality is normal, albeit in a decisively heteronormative frame and 4) that sexual abnormalities are cultural phenomena. All four translations of the “normal” found further translations in the course materials and the policy practices that I encountered in my fieldwork.
Sex and love

The very fact that the course for training of parents to become adequate sex educators is called “Growing up with love”, is a testament of the connection that is made between love and sex. The name of the course refers first - the course texts explain - to the love that parents have for their child. Second, the name refers to the idea that “normal” sex takes place in a romantic relationship. In the texts, the love between parents and children is referred to as a “warm nest”, which “contributes to a healthy sexual development of children.” (Rutgers Nisso Groep/ NIGZ, 2007: voorwoord). A “warm nest” is defined as a family in which parents show interest for their child, know what their child is up to (this is explicitly called monitoring) and support their child. The idea is that if parents behave in this manner, children will feel more free to ask questions about sex and discuss insecurities with their parents. Because of this, the texts say, they will behave more “healthy” sexually. This, in turn, means at least that adolescents will have sex for the first time at a later age, will be “more confident” in expressing what they want and do not want in relationships and will be “better protected against pregnancy and illnesses” (Rutgers Nisso Groep/ NIGZ, 2007: 4) when they do decide to have sex. The general goal of producing “healthy” and “normal” sexual behaviour is here translated into a particular definition of the “normal”: the connection between sex and love. That is further translated into a particular picture of a parent-child relationship (“a warm nest”) that implies the practice of talking about sex. Sex talk is thus at the end of this chain of translations.

“Normal” sex  →  Sex and love  →  “A warm nest”  →  Intervention: Sex talk

In the second meaning, the name of the course refers to the norm of “lust in love” (WRR, 2007; Wouters, 2005); the idea that sex is optimal and “normal” in a context of romantic love. This is reflected in the course text in the definition of sexuality itself:

“Sexuality is more than just making out and making love. (…) It is about relationships and feelings, about love and being together (intimacy), about being in love, choice of partner and relationship building. (…)” (Rutgers Nisso Groep/ NIGZ, 2007: 3-4)

This definition of sex is deliberately broad in the courses texts, because the developers want to speak about the social aspects of relationships, feelings and responsibilities, one of the designers
of the course explained to me in an interview.

In the normalising chart of “sexual development phases” of children that are represented in the course material, first “sexual encounters” (kissing and petting) are located in the context of the first time that adolescents or children (10-15 years of age) “go steady” (verkering hebben) and “have crushes/ fall in love” (verliefd worden) (Rutgers Nisso Groep/ NIGZ, 2007: 43). This variant of “normal” is equated to the categories “modern” and as “Dutch” when different “cultural groups” are discerned and it is said that:

“In a modern sexual upbringing, children usually have room to experiment sexually in a responsible way. (...) In most Dutch families, children are therefore allowed to go steady and have sex before marriage. It is important, in such cases though, that they view sex as something special, ‘you don’t have sex with just anyone’”

(Rutgers Nisso Groep/ NIGZ, 2007: 100, italics MvdB)

I will come back to these particular equations of “Dutchness” and the norm later on when I focus on the problematisation of sex and sexual development in immigrant communities. Here, the “normal” is again first defined as sex in the context of love. This leads to a definition of sexuality that includes love and being in love and is finally translated into a tool for professionals that teach the course: charts of “normal” sexual behaviour in which the connection between love and sex is made explicit again.

The translation from “normal sex” to charts of “normal” sexual development

“Normal” sex → Sex and love → Sexuality = love → Course tool: Charts of “normal” development

The sexual child

In the course mornings in which I participated, parents are first invited to think about the connection between sex and children in the following assignment. From my field notes:

*The teacher puts up a large sheet of paper to draw a circle. In the middle of the circle, she writes the words “sex” and “child”. Parents are asked to name whatever they think of with these two words in a brainstorm-like session.*
This assignment was the introduction into the theme, in which the tension that both professionals and parents felt between the words “sex” and “child” was resolved in a particular way: by speaking of the sexuality of children, whilst stressing their innocence. This is done by speaking of their sexual development and being, but maintaining the idea that they are not yet sexually active. There is thus an opposition underlying the texts between being and acting. This also comes to the fore in this interaction that I recorded in my field notes:

*Yvonne (the teacher) points to a little boy of approximately 1 year old that is on one of the mothers’ lap. She asks the mother of the little boy: “Do you think that babies have a sexuality already? Does he have a sexuality?” The woman responds somewhat shocked. Her eyes widen, she draws back physically and she fiercely shakes her head. Yvonne nods her head like yes and says: “Yes, he is, because he, too, is discovering his body and his feelings, isn’t he?” She refers to eating, drinking, pooping, peeing, cuddling and how babies discover through those activities what they like and dislike and what their needs are. Then Yvonne claims: “Sexuality is not just about sex, right? It is also about feelings.”*

Yvonne is, in this interaction, trying to convince the mothers of her broad definition of sexuality. This mother denies because she thinks of sex having to do with sexual acts between two adults, while Yvonne speaks of the child as a sexual being when she says “does he have a sexuality?” and stresses different bodily and emotional aspects of life. This broad definition of sexuality does not automatically become dominant in the classrooms. In fact, it is the object of negotiations as not all
parents agree (like in the excerpt above). But this definition is necessary for the teacher, because this way, she can legitimise her aim to talk about sex and children at all. Parents are encouraged to subscribe to this broad definition of sexuality in the course material, for example in the following hypothetical case that is presented to parents in order to explain children’s sexual feelings. This excerpt of the written course materials is to present parents with a norm of how to interpret children’s curiosity.

*The hypothetical case:*

“Your daughter of five years old has seen how a couple in love was hugging and kissing in the streets. She asks you: “What are they doing?”

*Explanation:*

*Parents are sometimes startled with their children’s questions at this age because they think that their children have sexual feelings already. That their children are aiming to kiss and have sex themselves. Most of the time, this is not the case. They only ask this question because they are curious. They want to know everything, to understand the world around them.* (Rutgers Nisso Groep/ NIGZ, 2007: 139)

The purpose of such hypothetical situations is for them to be discussed in the context of the course in structured debate. The child is presented here as “curious” but not yet sexually active herself. In another example in the course texts, this is further developed:

*“Many parents think that their child only needs sex education when he or she is going to be sexually active. (...) But the sexual development of children begins long before they become sexually active themselves.”* (Rutgers Nisso Groep/ NIGZ, 2007: 124)

Parents, according to this statement, should educate their child about sex before she is going to be sexually active herself and because the child’s sexual development starts many years before sexual activity is an issue.

| “Normal” sex | Child = sexual being | Sex education by parents | Intervention: Sex talk |

* *A second translation from “normal sex” to “sex talk”*

The particular translation of the “normal” here is the idea of a child as a sexual being. This idea of
children’s sexuality is further translated into the policy goal of sex education by parents. Again, the end of the chain of translations here is sex talk. The general policy goal of producing “normal sex” is translated into talking about sex and children’s sexualities in the context of the parent course. Parents are invited to talk about sex and children in the context of this course not because of an idea of children as sexually active, but because of an idea of children as sexual beings and, importantly, because they are developing into the (sexually active) adults of the future.

**Heteronormative gay-acceptance**

The possibility that children discover their homosexuality over time is made explicit various times in the course texts. It is, for example, included in the definition of sexuality when it says that “sexuality is also (…) being attracted to boys or girls (hetero- or homosexuality)” (Rutgers Nisso Groep/ NIGZ, 2007: 4). The discovery of sexual identities or sexual orientation is located in the pre-puberty phase, when the child is 10 to 15 years of age “at this age, boys and girls slowly find out whether they are attracted to boys or girls”. Again, the theme is further developed with a hypothetical situation about which the professional is asked to engage in debate with the parents.

*The hypothetical case:*

Your son of 14 years old tells you that he thinks he is in love with a boy in his class and asks you: “Is that strange?”

*Explanation:*

Your son asked you in confidence. This is special, because many adolescents would not dare to ask such a question out of fear for what parents, family and friends might say. It could be that you are startled by such a question, because you always assumed that your son was heterosexual. The fact that your son asks this question does not automatically mean that he is gay. It could be that he is in an experimental phase. There are boys and girls that have crushes on boys and girls both (they are bisexual). You can tell your son at this age that we all have a sexual orientation. We discover this about ourselves over time. This is not always easy and it can take a while before it is clear for a person what his or her sexual orientation is. This is why it is a good thing that your son takes his time to discover his orientation and not be pushed in a box. He will find out eventually on his own whether he is gay or straight. By listening to your son and accepting his feelings, you will get very far. Let him know that you are there for him, because adolescents that fall in love with someone of their own sex can feel very lonely. (Rutgers Nisso Groep/ NIGZ, 2007: 141-142)
This quote suggests to parents to be accepting of or at least patient about their child’s homosexuality and it is in that sense (at least in an internationally comparative perspective) progressive. The course in general promotes the acceptance of homosexuality. This fits the Dutch self-definition of a sexually liberated and inclusive nation (Mepschen et al., 2010). What also becomes clear in this quote is, however, that the discovery of one’s sexuality is, 1) a highly private and individual matter, 2) a choice between categories and 3) that parents, when confronted with the above question, should start a conversation about sexual identity and homosexuality at all. Adolescents, the quote suggests, discover over time whether they are gay or straight. In time, it “becomes clear” for individuals, this quote says, in what category they fit.

The inclusion of homosexuality in the definition of a “normal” sexuality in the course texts here leads to the advice given to parents to be accepting of homosexuality. The final translation in this chain is to talk about sexualities and sexual identities with children.

This conceptualisation of sexuality is further contextualised with a decisively heteronormative frame of clear dichotomous gender roles. And, as we know, we need clear heterosexual gender roles to constitute heteronormativity. The norm of heterosexuality is reproduced through the production of what it means to be masculine or feminine (Thorogood, 2000). The best way to illustrate this frame is to highlight the way in which a “normal” physical and emotional development of children is framed and presented. The texts that are used in the courses distinguish between five “sexual development phases” (from 0-3 years, 4-6 years, 7-9 years, 10-15 years and 16-18 years old). For each phase, a particular set of activities, curiosities and physical developments are presented as “normal”. The charts specify that gender roles become more clearly defined in phase 2: between the ages of four and six. The text says: “they (children, MvdB) develop clear ideas about ‘what a boy does’ and ‘what a girl does’” (Rutgers Nisso Groep/NIGZ, 2007: 42). This is further illustrated with this drawing (that is used to spur debate in the meetings, see below), in which the girl is dressed in a pink skirt and plays with a doll and the boy is dirty from playing football outside. The illustration is accompanied in a folder for parents about their child’s sexual development with the text: “sweet girls and tough boys”.

The third translation from “normal sex” to “sex talk”
In phase 3 of the “normal development” (7-9 years), too, gendered role patterns and a gender division are presented as normal, where it says: “boys think that girls are stupid and childish, girls think boys are too wild and are ‘acting tough’” (Rutgers Nisso Groep/ NIGZ, 2007: 42). Thus, according to the normalised charts of development, children develop into girls or boys, gay or straight. When the phase of puberty sets in (this is presented to be “normal” between the ages 12 and 15), first crushes are predicted. Again, drawings are used to spur debate in the courses and one such picture is this one of a couple in puberty.

In practice, this played out as follows:

Yvonne shows some pictures and asks us to respond. One shows a girl and a boy together. Yvonne says that they’re in love. The girl has a thought cloud with the girl leaning on the boy’s shoulder, the boy has a cloud of them kissing. In the cloud, he also tries to go under the girl’s jacket with his hand. The mothers in the class immediately respond: “girls always want romance, boys always want sex!” They all agree. When I suggest that sometimes, it can be the other way around too, the women set me straight and deny this possibility and claim that the picture shows how it usually is. Yvonne agrees with the women and adds that this is the reason why girls should be extra careful when it comes to sex and love.
In this negotiation, the teacher and mothers quite easily agree on a specific interpretation of normal adolescent gendered desire. My input in the discussion was meant to see if there would be mothers that would like to agree on other interpretations, but this attempt did not resonate. In fact, Yvonne even further highlights gender differences when she concludes that because of these differences, girls should be extra careful, thereby introducing the classic theme of girls and women being victims and boys and men being hunters. In this chain of translations, the “normal” is translated to the charts of child development in which clear gender differences are distinguished. These differences lead to the advice given to parents to be extra vigilant when it comes to the sexual development and behaviour of girls. And again, this vigilance is to take the primary form of talk.

The fourth translation from “normal sex” to “sex talk”

In another interaction in a different class, this theme came to the fore as well. I would like to introduce here the odd case out of my research: Robert. Robert is a middle-aged higher-educated white father of two young daughters (2 and 7 years old). He is not a member of the target groups as defined by the social work agencies and the municipality. But Robert has a very specific concern that explains his presence in this particular class (of “Growing up with love”).

Robert came to the meeting especially, he tells us, because his 7-year old daughter is very curious about sex. She showed behaviour that he and his wife find difficult to deal with. He says how he finds it complicated to respond properly because he finds his daughter too young for a lot of things. His wife and he did explain to her how children are made and born. She found this, he says, “all mighty fascinating”. It takes the whole meeting for Anne – the teacher – to understand that Robert means to tell us that his daughter is the one pushing the boundaries of what he finds appropriate, not the boys in her class. Anne first responded with a story of how you can teach your children to say no. Robert has to start three times over to tell us, in a rather nervous mood, that his daughter is, in fact, more sexually active than he finds desirable. He does not think that the general charts of “normal” sexual development that Anne draws apply to
his daughter. After a while of miscommunication back and forth, Robert goes on to tell us that his daughter has a boyfriend with whom she tried French kissing. Other boys in the class wanted to “go too”. His daughter mentioned this at home and quite liked both the activity and the attention. Robert dislikes her behaviour and feels anger towards the boys. “My first reaction is: who are those boys?! Let me have a word with them!”

Robert is struggling with his question and story because of the gendered and aged frame both he and Anne use to interpret sex. Anne first takes a long time to understand that Robert’s daughter is a 7 year old girl and not a young adolescent. In her frame, as well as in Robert’s, feelings of lust and sexual curiosity do not belong in the body and mind of a girl this young and therefore, Anne experiences difficulty even just hearing Robert’s story. Children’s sexual feelings are actively negated in this negotiation, even when they come in this very overt form. Also, Robert has to explain several times that his daughter is the one in the active role in this situation, not the boys in her class. Anne first understands the story within her gendered frame of “the normal”, in which aggressors are male and victims female, men active and women passive. The idea of a very young girl harassing boys is so far beyond the frame of what is “normal”, that at first it cannot even be heard.

Sexual abnormalities as cultural phenomena
I will come back to Robert and this particular interaction in the next chapter. But here, I think it is important to note that this is one of the very few times that a father with this particular profile came to the classes. Ironically, in the course texts and in the interactions in the classrooms, problems having to do with sex or social problems in general were mostly allocated with the “cultural other,” and not with families like Robert’s.

On the basis of my analysis of the course texts and interactions in the classrooms, I argue that in the courses that focus on sex, sexual abnormalities are considered cultural phenomena. The psychological, physical, biological or other factors that are historically part of explanations of sexual abnormalities are almost absent in the parenting guidance practices (and course texts) and cultural patterns and traditions have taken over this role. Consequently, the “cultural other” is made responsible for sexual deviance and sexual health problems. One of the ways in which this came to the fore was that in my interview with the course designer, she spontaneously started the interview with talk of culture and cultural difference, without me introducing this theme. In fact, as it turned out, the course was originally designed to deal with problems in particular “ethnic communities”: those of Antilleans and Moroccans. Later on in the development process, this target group became more inclusive, but still, this larger group is ethnically marked as well:
Target groups: “(...) Parents from diverse backgrounds: at least Turkish, Moroccan, Surinamese, Antillean and Dutch parents. First and foremost parents that have a low educational level and/or for whom the Dutch language is not their first language.” (Rutgers Nisso Groep/NIGZ, 2007: 3)

Diversity, in this quote, is defined in ethnic terms and in the next sentence, two more specific criteria are defined: a low educational level and speaking the Dutch language. The idea is thus, that parents with a higher education that speak Dutch as their first language (remember that Robert is part of this category) have no apparent problems with their children when it comes to their sexual development. Those problems are primarily located in groups with lower educational levels (later on, this definition is conflated with economic status of parents) and a different ethnic background. This idea also comes to the fore in a relatively recent report by the Dutch Scientific Council for Government Policy about migrants’ identifications with the Netherlands, where it says that:

“Dutch parents of the middle class have trained themselves since the sexual revolution in talking about sexuality without blushing (...) for lower educated parents, this is a much more difficult task.” (WRR, 2007: 157)

The text that is to advise the Dutch government then goes on to say that other “cultural” groups still have problems when it comes to the sex education of their children. This somewhat self-congratulatory analysis of sexual problems one-sidedly positions sexual problems with cultural others and with those of a lower class (see also Schalet, 2011: 201). Quite explicitly, this text and the “Growing up with love” course position middle class Dutch parents as the sexual norm. In the explanations for the professionals in the course guide, a selection of subjects to be dealt with in the course are marked as of special interest for cultural others and those with a lower economic status (SES) (Rutgers Nisso Groep, 2007: 11). And in the texts (ibidem: 99 and further), descriptions are given of the “cultural parenting” styles of the target groups. For example, when the texts speak of “The Moroccan sexual upbringing”, they point to a host of general “important aspects” in “The Moroccan upbringing” that influence sex education:

“societal success, obedience, showing respect, being polite (social conformism), being religious and knowing what is and what is not good (moral conformism), caring and being hospitable, being caring and loving for other human beings.” (Rutgers Nisso Groep/NIGZ, 2007: 100)
Note how the text underscores the importance for Moroccans of conformism, while the text also emphasises that a Dutch upbringing is not authoritarian, but authoritative and thus not focused on conforming, but, rather on self-government. The text locates sexual problems in “authoritarian cultures”, where (the idea is that) individuals have not yet sufficiently learned to govern their selves. When it comes to sex education, the texts stress that in a “Moroccan upbringing”, “mothers have the most important role”, but this raises problems because:

“Because they (Moroccan mothers, MvdB) often have been poorly educated in sex-related issues themselves, they often do not know what they should say to their children, in which way and at what time. Most mothers only start with sex education at the beginning of puberty. (…)” (ibidem)

This explanation of “The Moroccan sexual upbringing” legitimises the course “Growing up with love”, because it appears that mothers themselves are reserved in speaking about sex with their children and the course is based on the idea that talking with your children about sex is the way to prevent sexual health problems. Not-talking is a problem or even the problem. The absence of discourse and dialogue is in this example located in “Moroccan culture”. Likewise, in the sketch of “The Antillean sexual upbringing”, it says how a highly important value in this culture is that of “not asking questions”. The text analyses how, again, this “not talking” leads to “no or little sex education” and this leads to a collection of social and sexual problems. The most important problem when it comes to sex education and culture, is, thus, the absence of discourse and dialogue.

| “Abnormal” sex | Cultural phenomena | Absence of discourse | Intervention: Sex talk |

The translation from “abnormal sex” to the “absence of discourse” to the intervention of “sex talk”

Summarising, the “abnormal” is here defined as distinctly cultural and translated to a more particular definition of the problem: the absence of discourse. From my analysis, it can be concluded that in the parent course that focuses on sex, sex talk is defined as the “normal”, and also the cure to many abnormalities that are considered cultural. Culture as an explanation is omnipresent in the classrooms interactions about sexuality, as they are in the texts. The mothers and the professionals use it frequently to interpret their own and others’ behaviours. The following story is interesting precisely because of its spontaneous denial of the role of culture.
Recently, Gulsen (a Turkish mother of two teenage girls) tells us, she had friends over at her house and at one point, her friend said something like: “if a girl does not give sexual signs, a boy won’t do anything”. Gulsen says that the comment especially infuriated her because it was a woman who said it. Yvonne, the teacher, stresses that there is nothing particularly Turkish about what Gulsen told us. The Dutch, Yvonne, explains, say similar things.

What is interesting here, is not so much the gendered talk in itself, but, more so, how Yvonne spontaneously denies a cultural explanation of it, when she stresses that this is not particularly Turkish, even though Gulsen mentioned no such thing. A cultural explanation appears as so very natural and self-evident that it seems necessary to spontaneously deny the role of culture in this particular story. Yvonne means to say in this instance, she later explains, that these gender notions (that she finds not only false, but also backward) are prevalent everywhere. Interestingly, she immediately interprets that Gulsen meant to say something about Turkish culture with her story of backward gender notions. The image of liberation and progressiveness on the one hand (the Dutch side) and cultural backwardness on the other (Traditional cultures) side is thus once again affirmed precisely by denying the opposition.

In the parenting guidance practices focused on sex education, the “normal” is primarily defined in cultural terms, because the abnormal is primarily cultural. Culture thus works to define alterity; it defines the other (Schinkel, 2007). The basic logic here is that first, sexual problems are cultural and that in “Dutch culture”, sexual problems are (more or less) absent. Second, cultures are defined as coherent sets of norms and values and incompatible. Third, cultures are positioned in a hierarchical order, with “Dutch culture” on top. And fourth, culture is seen as a sufficient explanatory variable for a wide range of social problems such as teenage pregnancies, sexual violence, sexually transmitted diseases et cetera (compare Van den Berg & Schinkel, 2009).

The way in which culture works in the course texts and practices can be called culturist. Willem Schinkel developed the term culturism to point to a functional equivalent of racism, in which the focus is on the “second nature” of humans (culture) instead of on the “first nature” (2007a). Culturism works in a similar way as racism, but it focuses on cultural differences instead of biological or phenotypical ones. In the words of Gloria Wekker, today, “culture is doing the work of race” (Wekker, 2004: 491). In short, culturism can be defined as a discourse of alterity in which cultural incompatibility is negatively valued and attributed one-sidedly to the “other” culture (after Schinkel, 2007: 316).
Producing “normal sex” through talk

The techniques used in the “Growing up with love” course show how talk is the most important strategy to produce “normal sex”. Next, openness, dialogue and discourse are conceptualised as definite Dutch cultural traits. The other side of this conceptualisation is that of the “cultural other” as not talkative, not willing to engage in dialogue and consequently sexually deviant (compare also Schalet, 2011). Rogier van Reekum and I (Van Reekum & Van den Berg, forthcoming) have analysed how this synchronisation of the Dutch and a taste for dialogue led to a particular brand of Dutchness. The Dutch are, then, presented as a people that engage in dialogue and open debate, a people that are consensus seeking and pragmatist. In the logic that is behind this, social (and in the cases presented above: sexual) problems are presented as to be solved by talking about them, by positioning them as issues for dialogue and debate, by making them ‘bespreekbaar’ (to open up for explicit deliberation and reflection). The most important government strategy to produce the desired “normal” sexualities for the population of the future is, thus, talk.

Translations in parenting guidance practices

Input in transactions: chapter 5

The “normal”

Parenting guiding practices

Food

Knowledge

Sex

Household issues

Reading

Sex = love

Dinner table

Library visit

Talk

Government

Practice-Intervention

Reading

Sex = love

Talk
Conclusion: the population, the family and messy practices

As became clear in chapters 2 and 3, Rotterdam considers its population to be a major problem. Its ethnicity, its youth, its class and above all its behaviour and employability are issues that the Rotterdam administration wishes to change. Precisely because of this focus on the population as a problem and the family as a solution, perspectives that have been developed in governmentality studies were useful in the analysis here. In this chapter, I have shown how the family and the mother in particular have become instruments of government for Rotterdam. I have focused on particular issues that came up regularly in parenting guidance practices: food, knowledge and sex. Of course, these are not the only issues that are discussed by professionals and parents in the context of parenting guidance programmes. Issues such as bed-wetting, bullying, (personal) hygiene, puberty and sleeping were also often on the agenda. But the three issues that are highlighted in this chapter were especially salient in the practices that I encountered in my ethnographic research both quantitatively and qualitatively. That is to say: these issues came up regularly and when they did, they were given special importance and potency. Moreover, these issues tell us something about the kind of techniques that contemporary urban governmentality in Rotterdam employs. Food, knowledge and sex are not coincidental subjects. All three are considered by the course developers, professionals and Rotterdam administrators to be important gateways to population problems that the administration is especially concerned about: health, education and sexual deviance. And on top of that, especially the subjects of food and sex are about life itself and provide many entry points for intervention. The most private and personal in families is made visible and, consequently, governable by focusing so much on food, knowledge and sex. In this sense, the analysis in this chapter shows a contemporary way in which biopower works. The most private desires of mothers and children are turned into objects to be governed.

It is important to highlight once more that the way in which governmentality works in general, as do the parenting guidance programmes in particular, is through the positioning of norms. Effective government does not need repercussions and punishment, but installs positive norms and uses strategies instead of laws (Foucault, 1976; [1994]2000, N. Rose, 1989; N. Rose et al., 2006). By focusing on the particular norms and definitions of “the normal” that were produced in the parenting guidance on food, knowledge and sex, a particular picture of the norm surfaced in this chapter. First, the norm is classed. As became clear through my analysis of the practices of the Bureau Frontlijn, middle class eating practices were validated, while working class ones were pathologised. Through translations in the production of parenting guidance and the actual negotiations within the practices, it became clear that Frontlijn translated the basic human need for food (as this was how they legitimised their interventions) to distinct middle class norms about eating and correct social eating behaviour. Second, the norm is culturist. In particular through my
analysis of the sex education course, the culturist logic on which it is based surfaced. This culturist logic defined the norm quite explicitly as Dutch and defined the abnormal as definitively cultural. Especially the focus on talk and discourse are important features here, as the Dutch are defined as especially willing to talk about sex, to build dialogue and discourse and thereby prevent sexual deviance.

But to say that these norms were positioned in a coordinated way would be to overstate government. The analysis in this chapter showed how messy and ambivalent the production and communication of norms is. There is a coherency to the norms and to their production, but by focusing on translations of general policy goals into concrete topics for intervention, internal logics to policy making and policy implementation became evident as well. In this chapter, this was especially salient in my analysis of practices of parenting guidance with the general goal of enhancing the educational levels of the Rotterdam population. Here, professionals’ reflexivity translated general goals into concrete interventions, but precisely this reflexivity led to ritualistic and bureaucratic practices. Moreover, the norms that are developed to be communicated in parenting guidance are one element in a complicated set of negotiations and events that constitute the actual practices. Sometimes professionals undermine the norms they are supposed to communicate, sometimes parents disagree and sometimes the message is not received by the targeted group at all. What is in fact considered “normal” in practices is the end result of transactions between mothers and teachers. Policy designers and teachers may want to talk with mothers about sex in order to produce “normal sex”, but the actual production of sex talk depends on the collaboration of mothers. The chains of translations that I have analysed in this chapter and represented graphically appear rather clear-cut and linear. But 1) I discerned these from messy practices and 2) they are input to translations made in transactions with mothers. And mothers participating in parenting guidance may want to debate what “normal sex” is all over again. And when they do, a far more complicated chain of translations is made. This chapter isolated the chains of translations up until the design of an intervention. It highlighted translations of policy made by policy designers and executors. As I analyse in the following chapter, this is input in transactions that determine what is, in fact, produced in parenting guidance practices.