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

van den Berg, M.A.

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CHAPTER V
TRANSACTIONS I: MEDIATING POLICY
Transactions
In the room, in between
The governmentality perspective of chapter 4 helped to understand the way in which norms and particular definitions of the “normal” are instruments of government. The focus on translations showed how policy goals change when they are made into policy practices. This way, what is, in fact, considered “normal” in social policy could be revealed. Chapter 4 showed us how the official content of parenting guidance came about. What I left out is how the practices that I described there ended up. In a chain of translations, a focus on food could become a topic on a to-do-list for a professional: buying a dinner table for a family. But does that mean that the dinner table is bought? Does the family agree that this should be a priority? What kind of dinner table is to be purchased and at who’s cost and convenience? These kinds of dynamics are the object of this chapter. That does not mean that chapter 4 was not focused on practices. It was, but with a specific focus on the final translations of policy in practices of professionals. But negotiations, conflict and cooperation between mothers and professionals were largely omitted.

This chapter is about such complex transactions. It is about what happens between actors and objects in a specific situation (I have outlined my interpretation of the concept transactions in the introduction). I analyse these concrete situations here. In other words: what happens in a particular parenting class, on a particular morning is the result of the combined and related actions of the actors there. Teachers adjust their goals and means to a group of mothers that is itself internally differentiated. The mothers, on the other hand, respond to each other, to the set-up of furniture in the room, to the concrete props used by the teacher and so on. So I am interested in what happens when mothers and professionals meet and work together in a classroom setting, with policy ambitions between them. This chapter sheds light on the dynamics of policy execution. I understand parenting classes as a joint activity, not primarily something designed by policy makers and executed by professionals, but as much an outcome of the transactions of the mothers and professional (compare: Ewick and Silbey, 2003). Mothers and teachers co-produce parenting guidance practices and it is the process of this coproduction that is the object of this chapter.

One of the main problems in studying transactions is the problem of boundary specification (Emirbayer, 1997: 303). In my research, I investigate transactions between professionals and mothers in each other’s presence (cf. Goffman, 1959). Most of the time, these transactions take place within the physical boundary of the class room. What happens with the transactions when mothers get home, when professionals have lunch and chat with colleagues or how it translates to the relationship of mothers with their children is left out of the scope of my research. What is included is what takes place when teachers and mothers meet and transact in the particular locations where I did my fieldwork in Rotterdam.
Being part of transactions as a researcher

Because I was in the room where the transactions took place, or otherwise in the presence of the teachers and mothers, you will find narratives of situations in this chapter (as in the rest of this thesis) where I was actively engaged or my presence was in some way important to the transaction. In the classes, I usually sat at the table with the teacher and mothers and engaged in conversations. In most transactions, I tried to refrain from too much comment, or stayed in the background. But my presence was noted, explained, and it influenced transactions nonetheless. I have given a full description of my research methods in chapter 3. Here, it is important to note that I took the position of observer in my interpretation of participant observation, but I participated in some transactions nonetheless. I stayed in my role of a university researcher and was open to the other participants about my goals and ways of working. In my view, this was the only way to be in the transactions. It was not possible, nor desirable to take the role of teacher or parent. I did so because (at least at the time) I was not a parent or teacher, but also because that way of doing research would not have enabled me to study the transactions between the teachers and the mothers. However, as I have explained in chapter 3, being completely “outside” the transactions is impossible too: sometimes I was part of them and if this was the case, I include my role in the analysis in this chapter. I included reflections on my position or my inclusion in transactions in this chapter where I deemed them relevant.

Policy practice and time

This chapter is thus about transactions in the execution of urban policies. In other words, it is about policy implementation and execution. In this sense, this chapter can be seen in the context of discussions about policy implementations, for example in the work of Lipsky on “streetlevel bureaucrats” (1980; see also Engbersen, [1990] 2006; Rogers-Dillon, 2004; Van der Veen, 1990). This study builds on these perspectives in its focus on implementation and policy practices. It departs from Lipsky’s assertion that actual practices determine much of policy’s outcomes. Lipsky focused on ways in which individuals working in public service bureaucracies operate and use discretion. This chapter looks at the coproduction of policy practices. It looks at policy practice as the product of the work of both the executors and objects of policy.

In chapter 3, I wrote of Rotterdam policy ambitions in the field of parent guidance and of how one of the central categories there is “active”. Very particular definitions of activity and passivity legitimise intervention in personal lives of Rotterdammers. “Activation” (activering) is, in fact, a frequently used term to describe what it is that social workers do. I argued in chapter 3 that parent guidance is activation, but for mothers in their role as mothers. Women are activated into the unpaid labour of mothering the next generation. Strategies of social work agencies, policy
advisors, politicians and social workers and pedagogues focus on activation. They are aimed at accelerating the pace of urban inhabitants; at bridging the gap between those who are active and those who are “lagging behind”. In a way, they try to speed up people and influence their 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. Moreover, this activation looks at the future. It is geared at the next generation and at a future Rotterdam inhabited by “active citizens”. Time is thus an important category for these contemporary social urban policies on different levels. It focuses on activity and future, on the use of time and “lagging behind”. If mothers’ use of time is an important policy goal of parenting guidance, it is interesting to look at the way in which time plays a role in the transactions. That is why I use time as an important analytical category in this chapter to shed light on the dynamics in transactions in policy practices. As I will explain below, looking at time as a category in social analysis provides a prism that enables me to look at negotiations, power struggles and coproductions in transactions and at the way in which policy interventions for the future play out now, in the present moment.

**Mediating policy – beyond resistance**

I want to focus on what is “in between” mothers and teachers, without presupposing a certain power balance in advance. I aim to shed light on ways in which the ones participating in the transaction influence what is produced. Professional teachers and student-interns enter a transaction with a certain intervention in mind (an intervention that is the end-result of chains of translations) and my findings in this chapter show that this intervention is subject to change and alterations in the transaction as well. To trace these changes, I propose the term mediations. Mediations produce unexpected results: unexpected transactions. Through mediations, mothers are able to change what is done in the room, consciously and unconsciously, in conflict and in cooperation. In the following, I explain how I came to use this term and the advantages of it vis-à-vis perspectives of resistance.

**Strained transactions – resistance?**

Transactions are often characterised by negotiation, strain and conflict. I was first inclined to view these kinds of transactions as sites of resistance. I took my cue for this perspective from anthropologists and sociologists that argue that we should investigate practices of resistance because they signal sites of struggle and can help us to diagnose dynamics of power (Abu-Lughod, 1990, Ortner, 1995; Ewick & Silbey, 2003; Gilliom, 2001; Scott, 1985). Looking at resistance in the transactions that I studied, and using resistance as an analytical category at the time seemed to enable me to investigate power structures and look at conflict and negotiation. This way, actors
could be afforded agency. Also, in response to earlier publications of research, reviewers – scholarly colleagues – often urged me to develop a perspective on forms of resistance. And in some cases, a focus on resistance did help me in my analysis (I used it for example in Van den Berg, 2007; Van Reekum & Van den Berg, 2011; Van den Berg & Duyvendak, 2012).

But in the course of my research, I grew increasingly uneasy with looking at conflict or strain in transactions as forms of resistance for several reasons. First, it reduces what happens in the transactions to a reaction of one (group of) actor(s) to the hegemony of the professional or the policy makers. And this is exactly what I am trying to avoid doing by employing a transactional perspective. To recount, this transactional perspective is meant to take all elements of the transaction in a relational perspective: as always co-constituting each other. Moreover, by focusing on resistance as reactions to hegemony, I am at risk of defining one group as subaltern (the group of mothers in this case) that re-act and have therefore no politics and motives of their own (Ortner, 1995). Clearly, this does not reflect what I encountered in the practices, as mothers often have their own agenda. Shelly Ortner (1995) noted how many studies that focus on resistance are surprisingly apolitical: all politics other than that between the subaltern and the hegemonic is left out of scope. Second, if I were to interpret these parts of transactions as resistance, I am at risk of romanticising them and misattributing to the mothers forms of consciousness that they do not necessarily have or experience (Abu Lughod, 1990; Ortner, 1995). And third, in many transactions in which I participated, it was not at all clear that power indeed was with the actor organising the course. Oftentimes, the power balance appeared to be the other way around.

Conceptualisations of resistance are multiple, but many focus on the effects of actions and/or the intentions of the participants (compare Ortner, 1995). Both these defining elements are problematic. The first defines actions as forms of resistance if something changes in the situation as a result of the actions. Studies that define resistance in such a way focus on the transformative character of processes, not on the intentions of the ones included (see for an overview Ortner, 1995). The problem here is that it is entirely in the hands of the researcher to define actions as acts of resistance. In such a view, participant’s agency is only secondary and acts that were – at least for actors – not directly meant to change or challenge power distributions but did anyway, are included.

The second and contrasting definition is focused on the intention to resist hegemonic power. For this definition, scholars make statements about the extent in which subjects know the power distribution and are conscious of their position in this field. For instance, James Scott, in his influential work “Weapons of the weak” (1985), focuses on “everyday resistance” to point at the small everyday acts of farmers in Malaysia instead of greater revolutions. In his conceptualisation, the farmer’s “consciousness” of the power dynamics is the defining element. In
Scott’s words, “everyday resistance” is about “relatively powerless groups” “defending interests” with small acts “against (...) orders” (1985: xvi). Patricia Ewick and Susan Silbey employ a different and transactional perspective in their study of resistance to legal authority (2003). But for them, too, resistance is about consciousness. They define resistance as: “a conscious attempt to shift the dynamics or openly challenge the givenness of situational power relations” (1331). In their study, they use narratives of resistance as a “diagnosis of power” (1331), signalling the sources and limitations of power and “revealing the taken for granted” (1329).

One example of resistance in the conceptualisation of both Scott and Ewick and Silbey is “foot-dragging”: complying with what the one in power wants, but “at a pace (...) that exacts its own price” (Ewick & Silbey, 2003: 1359). In the transactions that I researched, slowing down and delaying the plan of the teacher was frequent. But is that enough to define this as “foot-dragging” and resistance? Does this mean that the women slowing down the transaction were “conscious” of a power distribution and trying to change it? I argue that this is not necessarily the case and that I should refrain from interpreting such behaviour in a theoretical framework of “resistance” for two reasons. First, reasons entirely beyond the scope of the transaction or the power balance in it led to behaviour that could easily be defined and presented to the reader as resistance. For example, slowing down the process could be due to a painful headache of one of the mothers or the inability to respond to questions of the teacher in fluent Dutch. In such a case, behaviour has very little to do with specific forms of situated “consciousness”. Second, elements within the transaction can lead to such behaviour that have little to do with hegemony or power structures. For example, sometimes teachers are unclear and fuzzy about what they want the mothers to participate in or there is miscommunication about goals, plans and needs. Such unclear communications can be responsible for a slow response. At any rate, in the particular context of this research, I do not have the kind of data, nor the desire to insist on knowing subject’s consciousness, nor at interpreting particular transactions in a sociological frame that is (in this case too) far from participants’ own experience and narrative. Alternatively, I focus in this research on what is done within the transactions that I studied.

“Ways of operating”: mediations
I was inspired by Michel de Certeau’s perspectives on “ways of operating” (1984) to interpret the data of my ethnographic research. De Certeau focuses on what is done in practices (consciously or unconsciously) and distinguishes tactics and strategies. Using De Certeau’s insights for my analysis freed me of the constraints that come with focusing on resistance but nonetheless enabled me to identify negotiations and struggles in transactions. Most important in his explanation of these two terms, are the dimensions time and space. Strategies entail planning, and the disposal
of space. A school has its class rooms at its disposal, a social work organisation plans parenting classes, and a city employs this organisation to execute social policies. The organisation of a parenting class is – in De Certeau’s terms – a strategy, as is the planning of a debate exercise as part of a particular meeting. Tactics, on the contrary, depend on time. They belong to those that have to deal and “make do” with strategies. “Strategies are able to produce, tabulate and impose (...) spaces, (...) whereas tactics can only use, manipulate and divert these spaces.” (30) For De Certeau, subjects use structures and regulations for their own purposes. For example, a city street is a spatial organisation that its dwellers use in their own way. These dwellers attribute their own meaning to this street and change it accordingly. They seek a “degree of plurality and creativity” (30). The amount in which they can change it, however, is limited. We all use tactics as part of everyday life; all of us take up structures and transform it in the way we respond and use it (compare also Frijhoff, 1999). The way in which we use the given, produces unexpected results (De Certeau, 1984: 30). And in this sense, tactics are creative production. The tactic belongs to those that “make do”; it belongs to those that consume. The place in which subjects “make do” is not theirs, but of the other, of the city, the business or, in this research, the social work agency or school. Tactics depend on time because they are “always on the watch for opportunities that must be seized ‘on the wing’” (xix).

Applied to the object under study here, Bureau Frontlijn and social work agencies organising the parent guidance programmes provide the context and space of parenting guidance practices. They decide on the type of intervention (as I discussed in chapter 4), arrange tables and chairs in the room, provide the props used in the practices and so on. Mothers in transactions act within this context but change the outcome too. Mothers are – in a way – consumers of policy. They “make do” within the space and with the strategies provided by (in the context of this thesis) Frontlijn or social work and in doing so coproduce policy. To see what it is that they are doing, how they contribute to the transactions in the practices, a focus on time is useful, because that is one important dimension for them to change or influence the transaction. And – as I explained a little bit above – because time was such an important category of the policies to begin with. I take from De Certeau this focus on time and space: The space is organ as part of educational strategies of social work and Bureau Frontlijn. Whatever room to manoeuvre the mothers in the practices have, they are dependent on these strategies and on time and moments to provide opportunities to alter the transaction. The advantage of De Certeau’s perspective is, thus, that change and contingency in transactions can be analysed without necessarily conceptualising these as forms of resistance.

But I use a different terminology. Because I want to focus on transactions, on what is “in between” mothers and teachers, and because I do not want to presuppose a certain power balance, I will not use the terms tactics and strategies. These terms are too close to resistance-perspectives
and especially the term “tactics” connotes too much disruption and conflict. In its stead, I propose the term mediations. Mediations, in my definition, are forms of “making do” that alter the transaction by using time. What mediations produce is open. As I will show with my ethnographic material in this chapter is that mediations can turn interventions (that are the result of chains of translations) upside down entirely. Through mediations, mothers change what is done in the room, consciously and unconsciously, in conflict and in cooperation. I take from De Certeau 1) his focus on “making do” and consumer’s creativity and 2) the element of time, because it allows for a particular perspective to bring alterations in transactions into focus. Of course teachers, like mothers, “make do” in the situation in which they find themselves. But I discussed the way in which they alter policy interventions in the previous chapter with my focus on translations. I look at mediations here when they are instigated by the mothers, as they are the primary group of “consumers” of parenting guidance policies. They are, after all, the ones targeted by the policy interventions. The design of the policies presupposes their consumption or participation in the practices. It should be noted, though, that the consumption of parenting guidance is as productive as the planning. Following De Certeau in his focus on “making do” enables me to look at both sides of this production; to look at transactions as coproductions. And the term mediation points to precisely this: how transactions are altered in between mothers and teachers.

**Five Mediations**

Mediations thus depend on time, on opportunities to be seized. From 8.30, or whatever time the parent course, class or other practice starts, the mothers participate in an activity that is planned and created by the social work agency, Bureau Frontlijn and ultimately the city. They consume what is produced in such a planned strategy and by consuming it, change it and coproduce the practice. Building further on the perspectives of De Certeau, I identify five types of mediations in the transactions that I encountered ethnographically: 1) joking, 2) particularising, 3) withdrawing, 4) mirroring and 5) decentring. All mediations change the transaction and all are localised with the mothers and use time to create opportunities to alter transactions.

**Joking**

Simone and Jolanda (introduced above) organised a course focusing on parental guidance for parents of children in puberty and adolescence: “Dealing with adolescents” (Omgaan met pubers). The course was organised in the parent room of an elementary school in Kralingen, in the North of Rotterdam. Many of the mothers present had several children of which the youngest were still attending the school in which the course was taught and the eldest were indeed in puberty and in secondary schooling. One of the main topics in this special practice was communication.
In six meetings, communication skills of different sorts were practiced and discussed. In the meeting preceding the one I am to describe now, Simone and Jolanda had explained the good practice of asking nicely instead of telling adolescents what to do. We had practiced this in various assignments.

In this meeting too, Simone and Jolanda want us to do assignments in which we are to replicate and reproduce interactive situations. They begin this morning by handing out sheets of paper on which the particular assignment for this morning is explained and Simone says: “You are going to do this assignment”. Once they have distributed the papers, Nienke, one of the mothers, suddenly declares with the most earnest look: “Well, I don’t think I want to participate. I don’t feel like it”. Simone is taken aback by this statement and pauses before she responds: “What do you mean; you don’t want to do this assignment?” Nienke: “No, I don’t want to do this assignment in groups.” And Nadia, another mother, says: “No, me neither.” Simone replies by stating: “Well, this is part of the course, that we do these assignments together…” At which point Nienke shouts out: “Kidding!” She explains: “weren’t we supposed to ask things nicely, to deliberate? You just tell us that we are going to do this assignment, after you’ve taught us last week to ask nicely by stating a wish!”

Nienke fooled me. I was startled by her refusal just as Simone was. Now that it is clear that Nienke was joking, Simone and Jolanda take a deep breath of relief. The other mothers, too, are laughing hard. Simone rephrases her request: “OK, I would appreciate it if you would please participate in this assignment.”

Nienke’s mediation of joking here depends on opportunity, on timing. She reflects on the teacher’s message of last week by “seizing the moment” in which Simone does not practice what she preaches. Joking is an especially potent mediation: it can turn a transaction upside-down. In this case, it quite profoundly changed the transaction and the way Simone had planned the meeting. In addition, the joke threatened the order of the class as it questioned the relationship between the teacher and the mothers. The joke showed the relative powerlessness of Simone: if the mothers refuse to participate, what is she to do?

Something similar but different happened in another parenting class in a community centre in the South of the city. This particular morning, the teacher Miriam has lost all control over the substance and transactions in the class. She doesn’t mind, she explains to me. And later on, she also points out to the women that this is “their group” and “their space” and that therefore, she does not want to be too controlling or directive. But she does have a programme set out for this
morning and during the class tries several times to get the women to comply. She has no success doing that. Just after she again has re-introduced the theme of the morning and has asked the women to reflect on it, Radia has a joke to tell us.

Radia draws all attention to her, announcing that she has a joke to tell. The women are laughing even before she starts telling the joke. She says: “this joke is about, what’s it called? Oh yes: Emancipation. So a Dutch, Belgian and Moroccan woman go to a conference about emancipation together. The first time, the Dutch woman says that she no longer feels like doing her husband’s laundry. The women at the conference concur. They say: that’s right! You shouldn’t do it anymore. He can do his laundry himself!” So when she comes home, she doesn’t do his laundry. Not the first day, not the second day. And on the third day her husband does his own laundry. The next conference, the women go again and this time, the Belgian woman says: I’m tired of ironing my husband’s clothes. He can do it himself, right? So the first day she doesn’t iron his clothes. And the second day neither. On the third day, her husband is ironing his own clothes. The next conference meeting, the Moroccan woman does the same. She says: I don’t want to cook couscous for my husband any more, he can do it himself! So the first day: no couscous, the second day: no couscous. The third day: black eye!”

In this particular transaction, again, an opportunity is seized. In this instance, Radia takes over the central and distributing role in the transaction from Miriam. She takes over the power to initiate a transaction. She does so by using a moment in which Miriam wanted her and the other mothers to reflect on the theme of the day. Telling jokes is an especially powerful way of marking social boundaries (Kuipers, 2006). In this case, both the teacher and I were very uncomfortable with the joke and the mother’s laughter. Miriam and I do not laugh while all mothers present break out into laughter and screaming. Radia uses cultural prejudices as a repertoire for jokes in which a Moroccan woman is the victim of domestic violence. Radia is of Moroccan descent herself and quite reflexive of this categorisation and what it means in public discourse. Her joke is an ironic performance that creates anxiety for those present that are frequently categorised as “Dutch”: Miriam and me. When Radia made the joke, I felt it almost as a direct accusation and felt it to be especially painful and poignant.

By affirming prejudices (note that when Radia uses the term “couscous”, as a marker of “Moroccan culture”, all women break out in even more enthusiastic laughter) with her joke, Radia lets Miriam and me know that she knows how many “Dutch” think of Moroccans. Also, by using the term “emancipation”, she shows her knowledge of public discourse on Moroccan women. The
joke is an inversion of transactional initiative: Radia takes over from Miriam. But it is also a way of reaffirming the boundary between the mothers present and Miriam and myself as “Dutch”. The joke excludes us because we do not find it funny and are instead invited to reflect on precisely the social boundaries that Radia is ironically affirming.

**Particularising**

Almost in all parenting classes that I visited, a selection of scientific knowledge was translated and presented to the mothers in some form. Many courses provided the teachers with teaching material in which knowledge of this kind was included. I included examples of these elements of the teaching material in chapter 4. Remember, for instance, the standardised charts of “normal” sexual development of children in the “Growing up with love” course. Mothers are asked to discuss standardised knowledge about “normal” behaviour, statistics and means. These confrontations with scientific knowledge in uses the “technology of the mean” (Noordegraaf-Eelens, 2008). In this technology, mothers are invited to look at their own child through the “glasses of the mean” (ibidem: 125). The idea is to compare, and to intervene when the deviation of the mean is too large.

Many mothers are indeed interested in these means, charts and legitimate knowledges. They compare their child’s development or ask the teacher to do so. But this part of the parenting course also probes a *particularising mediation*. Responding to these kinds of knowledge presentations, mothers often tell stories of their own children. They compare different children in different phases of their lives and oftentimes conclude that “My child is different”, or “what you are saying is true of my first and second child, but my third is completely different”. Introducing the particular in a transaction is a mediation that changes the status of scientific knowledge in the transaction. Instead of comparing their child to the mean, they compare the mean and norm to their child. This reverses the logic. The part of the class in which the teacher informs mothers about scientific knowledge thus offers an opportunity to tell stories and narrate about personal experiences. Again, the mothers in such a case seize the opportunity and moment to offer an element of their experience and life world. In such interventions in transactions, mothers define their child as the norm and the mean. The strategies of the teacher are then considered illegitimate if the images used in the strategy deviate too much from their experience with their own children. Mothers often explicitly base their comments on their experiences with “reality” and point out how the teacher is basing herself on “book knowledge”. Some mothers ask the teachers if they have children of their own. If not, an especially powerful mediation can be for the mothers to refer to this fact whenever the teacher relies on scientific “book knowledge”.

A second way to particularise besides introducing individual children, is introducing *particular situations*. That is in response to the hypothetical situations that the courses offer. In
the “Dealing with adolescents” course that I introduced before, for example, Simone and Jolanda asked us several times to watch part of a video in which actors performed different “parental strategies”. One example is a series of three scenes in which an adolescent asks for money. In the first scene, the mother gives the money and explains to the viewers: “what can I do?” In the second scene, the mother refuses and explains to her child: “No! You have to listen to us!” In the third scene, the adolescent’s question probes a dialogue between the mother and adolescent.

Simone asks the group of mothers about pros and cons for each scene that we watch on the TV. (...) She then explains the advantages of the parenting strategy in the third scene. Starting a dialogue to find out why your child wants this money is useful, she explains. Most mothers agree: this is the best way of responding out of the three ways that are presented to us. But the mothers do express their discomfort with these categories of behaviour. One mother explains: “Sometimes you use strategy 1, some other time strategy 2 and some other time strategy 3. As a mother, you are not always the same person, you don’t always respond in the same way. Situations are different and probe different reactions.” Simone agrees and says that for example the “authoritarian” method of the second scene is more likely when you are in a hurry.

In this transaction, mothers and teacher agree on the legitimacy of the third parental strategy that is shown on the TV excerpt and discussed. But the mothers mediate the categorisation of strategies. This presentation of reality does not fit their experience and they use the opportunity given by the teacher to debate the very idea of categorisations instead of the substance of the categorisation here. By introducing the particular, the strategy of the transmission of legitimate scientific knowledge is thus challenged.

**Withdrawing**

On many occasions during my field work, women included in the beginning of the transactions would withdraw at some point. Withdrawing was so very frequent and common, that teachers shrugged when asked about it. Teachers never expected a group of women to stay complete during a meeting – let alone to continue showing up during a series of meetings. One teacher in Feyenoord put it like this:

“As soon as there’s a discount on olive oil in the supermarket, women leave early or don’t show up at all. That’s just the way it is.”
It was indeed not at all uncommon that a group of mothers would be halved at the end of the meeting. In the two hours between the beginning and the end of a class, many had left with a headache, a child that needed to go to a doctor’s appointment, a friend that was leaving, out of shyness or a general discomfort with the meeting.

*It is 9 am. I enter the parent room of the school. Every seat in the room is filled. At least fifteen to twenty women are present at this moment. Most of them have their coats still on. I sit down at the table in the middle of the room. The woman sitting next to me has her baby of four weeks old with her in a pram. She also has a son of four years; he is the one attending this school. (...) She asks me how long “this” is going to take, referring to the class. When I respond that I think we are going to be finished around eleven, she says: “Oh no, eleven is too late. I won’t be able to stay then. I have to pick up my son from the photographer at a quarter to ten. I only came here to wait for him, really.” The discussion this morning is designed to be about bullying. (This meeting is what is called a “theme meeting”, see chapter 3 for an explanation of the various types of parenting guidance.) Marieke, the teacher, has several assignments and discussions prepared but she doesn’t quite get to executing these plans because of the chaos in the room. She asks the women that are not in the circle with her, but instead are sitting at another table (see drawing), repeatedly to “please join us”. When the women do not respond and some time has passed, she presses them with more urgency: “I really am bothered by you sitting there, not facing us, will you please come and sit here?” They respond to the request by moving their chairs. But the mobile phone of one of the women rings quite loudly twice and she answers. Sometime later both women leave.*
Marieke is successful, however, in drawing the women into a discussion about bullying. One mother tells a heart-breaking story of her son. He is being bullied because of his weight. Just a moment later, she quite carelessly leaves without saying goodbye. At 10.15 hrs., two thirds of the women that were here when the class started have left. When Marieke wants to start another activity with the women that remain, they say that they, too, haven’t the time anymore. Marieke stops and says: “well, maybe some other time, then”.

In this excerpt of my field notes, Marieke’s relative powerlessness is apparent. She has planned the course together with the parent consultant and she is planning the spatial lay out of the room when she urges the two women to join the group that sits in a circle. But because parenting guidance practices like this are not obligatory, she has no control over when the mothers arrive or leave. Her control over time is very limited: she can decide the time at which the meeting starts and when a specific assignment is planned, but whether the women participate, or whether they will stay until the anticipated end of the meeting is not in her control. As the above situation shows, withdrawing is not always in response to the planned meeting. On the contrary: most often, reasons entirely beyond the transaction are to blame. Transactions with persons outside of the transaction of the class (for example the arrangement to pick up your son at 9.45 hrs.), or simultaneous transactions (a friend leaving, a phone call intervening) are far more likely to cause withdrawal.

Withdrawal can, moreover, also quite easily follow involvement. In the transaction described above, a woman can be heavily involved in the transaction by telling the moving story of her son being bullied but still exit the transaction just after. For as long as she has time by her own definition, she participates in the transaction. But as soon as another situation outside of the transaction presses her to leave, she withdraws. In this case, I do not know the reason for her withdrawal. As a rule, I stayed in the room during the class, because these were my primary object of research. Consequently, I have not charted women’s reasons for leaving. The point is, though, that withdrawal was common and beyond the control of the teacher. It was a mediation used regularly and one that quite profoundly changed the transactions in the class because it changed the transactions’ participants. In the above example, Marieke was even fully unable to execute her plans, because of the amount of women leaving and the lack of involvement of the women that stayed. Also, withdrawal usually is accompanied with the moving of chairs, coffee cups being tidied up, whispering and doors banging. Withdrawal not only disturbs transactions because elements/ persons are taken out of it, but also because those staying are distracted.
Mirroring

The mediation joking oftentimes also involves mirroring. I witnessed and was the object of many instances where a mother would turn the tables and scrutinize my, or the teacher’s behaviour. This was the case in particular when a culturist logic was used in talking about parenting, for instance when certain parental problems were considered “Moroccan” or “Islamic”. Such culturist discourses open up *repertoires for mirroring mediations*. In the sex education courses that I highlighted in chapter 4, I argued that openness and sex talk was rewarded and deemed important by both the course designers and the professionals teaching. Precisely because this was the case, and because this openness was considered typically Dutch, migrant mothers that participated sometimes seized the opportunity to surprise with dirty jokes, funny narratives of their own sex lives or even culturist views of the Dutch. What follows is an example of such an instance in my field notes:

*Ikram steals the show with her comment that Dutch men have cold blood. She says: “you know that we (she means Moroccans, MvdB) have warm blood, don’t you?” while she looks at me challenging. She tells us how she heard that Dutch couples only have sex twice a week. “We are in the mood much more often, not every day maybe, but our women...we are in the mood a lot.” Yvonne, the teacher is not amused. She says how she has heard this story before and asserts immediately that it is false in her view. But the mothers agree that Dutch women try to do too much: work, children, all at once. It is easier to have a good sex life when you are at home and your husband works, they say.*

Instead of being part of the group whose sexuality and sexual moral is problematised, Ikram here turns the tables: she problematises the lack of libido of the Dutch, using a culturist logic that is similar to the dominant culturist logic that “Others” her. This transaction teaches us how this taken for granted culturist logic works (compare for a similar analysis of power dynamics Ewick & Silbey, 2003). Ikram’s intervention reveals this particular order of things by humorously turning the logic around and thus turning the mirror on us: the “Dutch” teacher and me. She can play with the norm of talking about sex in this instance because she can use what is asked of her (openness) to point out what she considers the boundaries of Dutch sexual liberation. In this particular transaction, she included me as a person representative of the “Dutch” and thus lacking in sex-drive, just as she is often taken to represent “Moroccans” or “Muslims”.

A similar case is the following excerpt of a “theme meeting” about loverboys (*loverboy* is the term frequently used in the Netherlands for young men luring young women and girls into
(forced) prostitution). After a strained discussion about forced prostitution and young girls, the teacher, Marieke, looks at the paper cards before her. These are part of the teaching material for this particular course. Written on the cards are questions about the issue of this morning. These questions are meant to guide the discussion. Also, in the course material, statistics on frequency of human trafficking and demographics of loverboys are included.

Marieke decides to discuss one more question on a card this morning, because we still have some time left. She says: “I think this is a good one to discuss.” The question is whether or not loverboys are “allochthonous”. At first, the women respond by saying no. This leads to Marieke referring to the statistics in her course material and explaining to us that many loverboys are, indeed “allochthonous”. She looks at the two Moroccan women (the only two Moroccans present) at her right and claims that oftentimes loverboys are Moroccan. She says: “we all know that there have been quite some problems with Moroccan youngsters, right? Before, we had these same kinds of problems with Antillean or Surinamese youth. Those young guys often grow up in bad neighbourhoods and oftentimes, they have gone through a lot themselves.” The Moroccan women do not respond. They sit quietly and listen. Marieke lists the statistics that say that 37% of loverboys are Moroccan and in total 89% are “allochthonous”. Sitting across from Marieke and me is a woman, Aysun, who has been dominant in previous discussions this morning and at this time, too, draws attention to herself by telling us how she saw a television show that featured a story about a man who coordinated a criminal network from the Netherlands. She deduces from this TV show that it is quite possible that “Dutch” men use “allochthonous” boys to find girls for prostitution: “those boys are being used by Dutch criminals!” Marieke then responds by finishing today’s meeting and concluding that “loverboys” is a difficult topic to talk about.

Like in the example of the joking of Ikram, Aysun here reverses the gaze and mirrors the logic. Instead of “allochthonous” being scrutinised and blamed for a phenomenon as serious as forced prostitution, she blames the “Dutch”, categorising in a similar logic.

Usually, the response of the teacher to such mirroring was absent or was to introduce the next element in the class, like Marieke did. Teachers seldom took the opportunity to look at themselves with the same scrutiny with which they debated the participant’s behaviour. That is not to say that teachers were not reflexive of their role or of their own lives and role as wife or mother at home. They were, and would often include such reflections in the transactions. They
would for instance stress how difficult raising children is in their own experience, or how they were frustrated at home with a husband who refused to clean the house. But the mediation of mirroring seizes opportunity and *seizes initiative*: the leading role in the transaction is in such a moment appropriated by a mother and the teacher is then invited to reflect on herself. These opportunities were thus seldom seized by teachers, as is also the case in this excerpt:

*The teachers Simone and Jolanda initiate an evaluation of the series of meetings in the second part of the morning. They ask the mothers to reflect on what they’ve learned and to evaluate the use of the course for their daily lives. The mothers respond (...) and are curious. They ask Simone and Jolanda: “and what did you learn from us then?” to this question, Simone and Jolanda do not respond.*

**Decentring**

The final mediation that I would like to highlight in this paragraph is that of decentring. The policy intervention that is parenting guidance depends on the centring of attention. It depends on a topic or set of topics and on all participants in the transaction to focus their attention on this particular issue. The planning of assignments, the structured debates, the props and videos: all are used to focus attention to a particular problematic. However, women attending the courses often used the opportunity to speak to the professional about something else entirely. It should be noted that the courses are not the only places and times that the mothers can speak to the professionals. Most professionals also have visiting hours in a local community centre. Parents can make an appointment with a pedagogue to discuss their particular questions. But still, when mothers are included in a transaction with a pedagogue, they use the opportunity to ask questions beyond the scope of the topic of the day.

*Marieke takes out her calendar to make an appointment with a mother that complains about her child having sleeping problems at the age of four in a class about “values and norms”. They make a separate appointment. This delay is used by another mother to mention her problems with her son of eight years old.*

Such mediations would *delay* the plans of the teacher and *slow down* the transaction. And it decentred attention by expanding the scope of topics. Usually, teachers would respond to decentring by asking the women to make a separate appointment to discuss the issue they are raising, like Marieke did in the above example. But sometimes, it also caused irritation for the teacher and prompted annoyed comments.
In the introductory round, the woman sitting next to me, Karima immediately expresses her worries. “My son is ten years old and already he doesn’t want to go to school. He is only ten and already he doesn’t want to learn. My husband and I don’t understand. He is angry and won’t go anymore.” At first, the teachers, Brigitte and Simone, do not respond. Instead, another mother, Melek, intervenes and says: “There is probably something going on, then. Is he being bullied?” Karima doesn’t understand immediately, but when she does, she replies that indeed that might be the problem. She talks rather panicky and utters all her family problems at once. Simone intervenes and says that we can talk about “all this” later, or Karima can make an appointment, but for now, she would like to continue with the programme. Brigitte takes over the leading role from Simone at this point and discusses the woman’s case with her and with Melek, physically turning her back on Karima. She says that “there is already social work involved in this case” (er zit al maatschappelijk werk in), so there is “assistance on it” (er is hulpverlening). She turns towards Karima and says that she can make an appointment with local social workers if she would like. And, she says, the rest of the course will prove to help her. “So come to the other meetings as well!”

In this transaction, the teachers cut off the possibility of discussing Karima’s urgent worries. When Melek intervenes, thus making the transaction much more complex, Brigitte and Simone are slightly annoyed. At this point, Brigitte even speaks about Karima as a case. She avoids the opportunity to talk to her or with her directly, but instead chooses to deliberate with Simone and Melek first, to then cut off this decentring episode and return to the programme as planned and make up for the delay. Simone and Brigitte express urgency when it comes to their plans. As a consequence, the result of the transaction is that the class is continued and Karima’s worries remain not dealt with. The following meetings in this particular course were not attended by Karima. Whether or not this transaction is the cause of her withdrawal, I do not know.

**Lethargy and sluggishness**

**Doing nothing**

It the above paragraphs, action in transactions is scrutinised. By writing about these transactions I have given the false impression of parenting guidance as active and maybe even exiting events. There is conflict, participants joke and laugh, assignments are made. Nonetheless, much of what I witnessed in my fieldwork was very low-energy, slow and, quite frankly, boring. Oftentimes, we were “doing nothing”. Boredom and lethargy tend to be left out of sociological analyses (Bengtsson, 2012). But this paragraph is about parts of transactions that were not so very eventful
but nevertheless do tell us something important.

Waiting was something that I – like the teachers – often had to do in my field work. One of the things that took the most getting used to in going along with the professionals and following their work, was the very slow pace and the lethargy that I felt and encountered in others. I was slowed down and oftentimes was “doing nothing” in the field. I felt this to be frustrating and in this paragraph, I will go into some of the reasons for this listlessness and what my feelings of frustration told me about the practices that I studied. As I explained in chapter 3 on methodological considerations, I remained, in the field, in the role of observer. I never aimed at full immersion, or “going native”. I did, however, participate in house visits, meetings, classes and course programmes for months. 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.

Ehn & Löfgren (2010) write in their book on “doing nothing” about a “contemporary (…) obsession with productivity” a “cult of speed” (ibidem: 8). Like many others, I too often fear waste of time and am uncomfortable with idleness. My mother was a head nurse when I was a child and in our family, we often joke about how fast she would walk and how we as children would have to run to keep up with her. She would talk of the need to walk fast in her work, and how when people would apply for a job in the nursing home in which she worked, she would walk with them for a while through the building as a test to see if they could keep up the pace. Also, my sisters and I were often corrected by both my parents when we would loll in our chairs or on the couch. An active posture was very much valued in our home. Whether or not my aversion to strolling, lolling or sagging in chairs is related to my mother’s occupation or my upbringing, I do not know for sure. But I do know that I found sluggishness the most striking feature of my fieldwork and felt frustration within my own body when I experienced lethargy and boredom myself.

In fact, it was one of the first things about which I made extensive field notes. I started my fieldwork with the Bureau Frontlijn and here, students complained about boredom. Lolling was the norm. When one of the managers supervising the students in their internships was in a meeting with one of her students, she talked about a family that was participating in their programme, receiving help. During the entire conversation, she either hanged in her chair, or sat using her hand to hold up her head that was tilted to one side as a consequence.

She sighs often and at one point even refers to their work as “nonsense” (onzin) to then immediately correct herself: “Oh well, nonsense. Of course this is very important” at which point she frowns and looks back at the papers in front of her.
In instances like this, I had to control myself not to make some sort of comment or joke about the complete lethargy that spoke from her posture and way of talking. I was not the only one feeling frustration, though.

When I walk out of the metro station, I see Anna (a student working for Frontlijn) walking towards the Bureau Frontlijn office. I catch up with her and we chat while walking. I am in a hurry because the morning’s briefing meeting (there were briefings every morning in the office before the students would start their work “guiding” the mothers, this was the first I was attending), is about to start, but Anna walks at a very slow pace and I don’t want to rush her. When we arrive at the office a couple minutes late, I feel anxious because I am afraid that the meeting has already started. I am worried that our being late will annoy the managers of the Bureau. It turns out that there was no need to rush because even though we are a couple minutes late, we are the first to arrive. Most of the students and managers arrive fifteen or even thirty minutes late to the briefing, with or without an excuse. On this particular day, more than half of the students have called in sick. Most “house visits” don’t have to be cancelled, because there weren’t so many planned to begin with. I go along with Anna this morning. Anna is going to IJsselmonde, to a family that she feels doesn’t need help anymore. “But they are sweet”, she says. We have to find out where they live exactly, because Anna doesn’t remember from the last time she visited. We get lost and walk around IJsselmonde for a long time before we find the house. Nobody answers the door. Later in the day, Anna opens up her email inbox and sees that the woman had emailed her to say that she wasn’t able to meet us at her house because she had to go to school. Anna really wanted me to come along. She doesn’t like being an intern with Frontlijn and wants to tell me her story. She feels that there is not enough to do for her and her colleague students. She feels that ten months is way too long a period for this internship. She would love to learn more than what is possible here. She says: “I don’t think it’s very surprising that so many students call in sick.” “We just sit there, in the office all day, in that dark hole.” And, ironic: “Fun!”

Anna is complaining about her sense of boredom in this conversation. Just like me, she is a novice to this kind of work and this organisation in particular. Apart from the critique on Bureau Frontlijn that she formulates, a day with Anna showed me what a day of sluggish waiting for a client that doesn’t show up and having nothing much to do besides the waiting made myself and her feel.
Because we were new, we were still surprised about the pace and the sense of uselessness. To the ones working with Bureau Frontlijn for a longer period, this was far less prevalent. For example, when I asked one of the managers, Annemarie, about the high absence rates among the students she commented:

“I don’t know why the students are sick so often. Sometimes, I would like to put a large pot filled with vitamins at the office for everyone to take. But you know, we work hard and the people that we visit have a seriously low resistance to disease.”

Annemarie feels that the absentees are at home sick because of Bureau Frontlijn’s clients. Anna’s and my experience of lethargy and feeling useless is not shared by Annemarie, who has been here for a much longer time. Instead, she feels everybody at the Bureau works hard. This suggests that Annemarie has been socialised into and grown accustomed to exactly the rhythm and expectation of her work that Anna and I find frustrating.

Transactional sluggishness
But I did not find lethargy and sluggishness only at Bureau Frontlijn. In the other organisations, many practices were very low-energy too. So why is this and what does my experience of frustration tell me about the practices that I studied? Many reasons can be attributed to particular participants in the transactions. For instance, in Bureau Frontlijn, many of the students were still very young (around twenty-one) and had a lot on their mind that was not work-related. Having to find their way not only in a rather unstructured internship for the first time, but in life in general (dealing with boyfriends, what to think of TV shows, conflict with parents, these were typical topics in the students’ conversations), I think contributed to the sluggishness that I witnessed. But I will limit myself here to factors that were produced within the transactions that I studied. I think that lethargy and sluggishness can be part of what is in between actors. Like boredom, it can be a “collective sociality” (Bengtsson, 2012). The most relevant factors in this context are threefold: 1) dependence, 2) complexity and 3) contagion.

First, parent guidance practices are a positive service, a positive form of policy. As most forms of government, they do not rely on punishment but instead on the setting of examples and norms. The trouble is that mothers have to be present voluntarily in body and spirit in order for that to effectuate. No mother in the practices that I studied was obliged to participate. There were no repercussions for the mothers if they didn’t, no way for the professionals to make sure that the women would show up, be on time, participate or continue to show up for more than one meeting. In this type of social work, the professionals are very dependent on clients. To change the
daily behaviours of mothers (and this was, in fact, the ambition of many professionals, especially in Bureau Frontlijn) is a very challenging task and working towards such a goal, professionals perform in a constant balancing act between intervention and non-intervention (cf. Schuyt, 1997) that is entirely dependent on clients' behaviour. This limits the possibility of planning and gives the teachers a narrow time-horizon. Especially with longer term programmes, this was a problem. For example, many of the methods and course materials used by the professionals were designed for three, five or six meetings. But there were no guarantees that a particular group of mothers would show up for more than one meeting. As a result, every meeting felt like starting over. Or mothers and teachers decided together to not start with the planned programme because of the lack of participants.

One morning with the Mother and Child programme, only Cassandra and Lee have shown up at 8.30. All attention of the three student-teachers and the mothers goes to Cassandra’s little girl. At 9.30, the students feel that it is better to end this meeting. It is the end of May and the programme is planned to continue until July, but Carrie, one of the students, says that she expects a low turn-up until summer recess anyway. Cassandra and Lee have some more coffee with the students until 10.30. Nobody really knows what to do, so there are several awkward silences and much lolling about.

Because of the many absentees, none of the plans of the student-teachers effectuate. Instead, in a rather awkward two hours, we drink coffee and “do nothing”. Even more so, the students are already anticipating a series of meetings like this one for the following month, where they expect low attendance too.

Many parenting guidance practices planned on the quarterly schedule of the social work agency where I did much of my field work would not materialise at all. I showed up many times at a given date, time and place, only to find that the course had been cancelled or rescheduled. For example, a course that was to run for five meetings was cancelled altogether because the first date was accidentally planned on the same day that Muslim women celebrated Eid Al-Adha (the annual feast of sacrifice). Instead of rescheduling the series of meetings, the teacher here decided that it was “no use” and that the entire course should be cancelled. Much lethargy thus had to do with the large dependence on the attendance and active participation of mothers.

The second factor that contributed to sluggishness is the complexity of problems. Some contexts on which either Bureau Frontlijn or the social work organisation wanted influence were so very complex that all possible action seemed futile. Resolve seemed beyond the reach of the professional in these cases, leading to a certain emotional disinvestment. For example, when one
mother confessed of experiencing problems in raising her three-year-old daughter, the pedagogue that taught the class responded by not responding. The mother told us about how she never punishes her three year old, because she wouldn’t understand anyway. Recently, her daughter tore the pages out of a book at which she responded angrily only to see her daughter start over as soon as she could grab the book again. Later, the teacher comments in conversation with me:

“This (the course) is all focused on prevention and you know that’s fine. But with this mother, I would have to work more intensively because she really needs other stuff, more guidance. Because what I’m getting from her stories is that she really can’t handle her daughter. Her daughter rules the house. In such cases, this programme isn’t enough, really.”

Because this particular course was discontinued after the first session (there were meant to be three), I do not know whether or not this teacher had the opportunity to work with this mother in the way she preferred. What I do know is that the goal of parenting guidance is negotiated by the teacher in a way that leads to non-intervention in this particular transaction. In her view, these courses are not meant to deal with such parental problems. Her anticipation of the complexity of the problems of this particular mother led her to redefine what the course is for: the prevention of parental problems. Not dealing with existing problems in raising children. And this translation in practice leads to passivity.

Similar non-responsiveness was omnipresent in Bureau Frontlijn practices. The following is an excerpt of field notes that I took describing a “house visit” with two employees of Frontlijn. We visited Melissa, a mother of a young boy living in an IJsselmonde flat.

Melissa complains about the municipal service that helps her with her debt. She complains about how much the people that work there want her to change the way she lives. “And I can never reach them on their phone number!” “You know that I call every day and she never returns my calls. That woman doesn’t even know that I moved, probably.” Anouk and Marije (the student and supervisor) sit in Melissa’s living room and do nothing. They respond to her story by telling her that she’s right, but they do not propose any course of action for Melissa’s problems to be solved in this instance. After a long while of Melissa ranting about this service and other services on which she is dependent, she declares: “Anyway, I don’t like telling people my story over and over again.” We are so very passive in listening that we provide a lot of room for Melissa to tell her story and complain. Melissa has been a client of the
programme for a long time. And still, to me it seems that Anouk and Marije are only just starting to realize the extent of her problems. Anouk makes an inventory on her notebook of things that need to be done while Melissa talks. None of the items are dealt with immediately. Instead, these will be topic list on a next appointment, still to be scheduled. I sense the same passivity that I notice with Anouk and Marije within myself. The conversation with Melissa takes two hours without any action on our part. It feels like there is so much to be done, that all small action is futile.

Interestingly, Bureau Frontlijn’s raison d’etre is their claim on “doing everything”. Their critique on urban social services focuses on policy fragmentation and Frontlijn proposes working “integrally” as the silver bullet to the problems of “multi-problem families”. The idea is thus that the students and supervisors from the “Practice Guidance Programme” visit families and intervene in different spheres of life at the same time, ranging from cleaning out dirty kitchens to arranging employment and giving pedagogical advice (see chapter 3 for a more detailed explanation of this programme). My data suggest that precisely such a wide range of interest and possible interventions results in passivity. To want to intervene in everything is to end up doing very little because of the sheer complexity, and fuzziness of such a task.

The third reason is that some of the lethargy in transactions originated in the behaviour of the teachers or the mothers. Sluggishness – as we all know from everyday experience – is highly contagious. When a teacher would anticipate on a specific kind of energy in a group, she would set the pace accordingly.

In an elementary school, a group of five mothers are gathered for a course. Four of the mothers are of Turkish descent and do not understand the Dutch language very well. One of the mothers has brought a freshly baked cake to share. During the two hours in this afternoon, most of the time, we are waiting for translations from Dutch to Turkish and the other way around. Anne says how she does not mind this, but soon, she yawns and ten minutes before she arranged the class to be over, she proposes to end it. The group, however, wishes to continue. After the class, Anne says to me how she really did not like teaching this class. She confesses that she finds it very difficult to ‘move’ these women in the direction that she would like and therefore had decided beforehand that she was not going to address all the elements in the course material.

Anne started with a preconceived notion of the group as being unresponsive and passive, and decided to skip many subjects on the agenda. Consequently, the conversation lacked urgency and
was cut short ahead of time. Moreover, Anne, the mothers and I had to wait during the class for translations. Between Anne, myself and the mothers, there are very limited expectations of the level of activity. Moreover, Anne speaks of her frustration in trying to “move” the women. She aims to speed them up, to accelerate their pace, to influence their use of time. The situation and the behaviour of the mothers in the situation prevent Anne from achieving this goal. Likewise, when a teacher does have an ambitious agenda for a meeting and the mothers present are only looking for a cup of coffee and some entertainment, the consequence is a low-energy meeting. For instance, one morning:

There are two large leather couches in the room, the kind in which it is difficult to sit up straight and much easier to hang or lie down. The women that are sitting on these couches are indeed practically lying down and chatting. I sit down at the table because I assume that that is where the class is going to be taught. But this doesn’t seem to be the case; the women take place around the coffee table.

In this excerpt, the physical posture of the mothers as influenced by the furniture is decisive of the energy in the transaction. Because of these objects in the room, and the way this influences the level of activity of the mothers, the teacher has an especially hard time realising her ambitions. The physical artefacts induce passivity in the participants, making “moving” or “activating” extra difficult.

**Frustration**

Sluggishness undermines the goals of the policy efforts that I studied. As “activation” is one of the primary policy goals, inactivity, passivity and lethargy are a big threat. One of its consequences is non-intervention; nothing is being done. And sluggishness can also lead to even more counterproductive consequences, for instance when professionals let themselves be irritated by the situation and the perceived unwillingness of mothers to be “moved”. In such an instance, they expect event and consequence. And if none take place, frustration is the result (compare Bengtsson, 2012). One example of the way in which this can work is described in the following excerpt of my field notes of a morning with the Mother and Child Programme. The goal of this morning was to teach the mothers about healthy foods and thus to intervene in daily eating routines.

The students ask the mothers to do an assignment. The students hand out a small pile of flyers and promotional folders from supermarkets and ask the mothers to use their scissors to cut out pictures of different kinds of foods and glue the pictures to a form
in which a figure is printed that is the general guideline for healthy food (de schijf van vijf). The mothers cut and paste the pictures to the form, and after this is done, it is time for the morning’s coffee break, and the children come into the room again to join us (mothers and children were separated during the first part of the morning). The students play loud children’s music with a heavy beat and present everybody with a fatty cake.

What is interesting here is the discrepancy between what has just been taught and positioned as the norm in the informative part of the morning and what is done by the students in the coffee break. The framing of the situation changes and immediately, so does the message. This discrepancy is connected to the student’s frustration with their work. Again, time is essential here. Within the time that is marked for the classes, the interns feel more or less comfortable in their role of teachers and act accordingly by asking the mothers to participate in an assignment that is meant to teach them about healthy eating. The definition of the situation before the coffee break is educational. But at the time that the coffee break starts, this relationship is departed and this leads to quite severe insecurities for the students. The relationship changes when time/space – or the situation – does. The interns expressed to me in an interview that they often felt useless, sluggish and insecure. They expressed their frustration and even aggression (this was the word they used themselves) about their sense of powerlessness and uselessness (especially in these “in between” situations), complaining about the mothers “never doing anything in return”: never doing anything for them. One of the students commented: “They see us making an effort to make these mornings cosy (gezellig), don’t they? So why can’t they return anything?” In the above described situation, the cakes and the loud music were means for the students to gain a sense of control over the situation and comfort in that situation, once the form of the relationship is no longer self-evident in this temporary non-educational setting. The students experience a high level of dependence on the mother’s consent and participation. The frustration that is the result of this dependent relationship leads them to undermine the message that they intend to communicate. In a specific situation of uneasiness, they put on loud music and present high calorie food to the mothers and children, undermining their message about healthy eating.

Chaos and the will to be equal
Looking even more closely at time and space and the way they are interdependent (Massey, 1994; Harvey, 1989; May & Thrift, 2001), it becomes clear that the spatial planning of parenting classes, the time boundaries of the transactions, and the space/time dynamics that I recorded in my field notes are what gives insight into the dynamics of power. Typically, parenting guidance practices
are provided in what is called the “parent room” of elementary schools. Many elementary schools in Rotterdam have such a special room for parents as part of their efforts to establish what is called “parent involvement” in the proceedings of the school (see chapter 3 for the more detailed account of the organisation of the classes). The parent room is usually furnished with sets of tables and chairs and a small kitchen. Oftentimes, there is also a playpen or a play area for small children (below the age of 4). There is coffee in the parent room, and almost always cake or cookies. This lay-out and furnishing of the room is the result of the work of the “parent consultant” (I have explained the role of these consultants in chapter 3). In the parent room, mothers are invited to sit in chairs at the tables. These are most often arranged in a circle (or similar form), so that all participants can see each other’s face. When the table and chairs are not yet laid out as such, the teacher of the course would arrange them so before the start of the meeting with the parent consultant. Blackboards or whiteboards were not always part of the inventory of the parent room. But the teacher almost always made sure that some substitute was: a large piece of paper, a power point presentation or a hand-out.

Below is a drawing that I made for my field notes of a particular set up of one morning. I made such drawings as a supplement to my written notes and as a reminder of the participants and the spatial dimension of the transactions. This particular drawing is to an extent representative of the spatial organisation of parent classes that I encountered most frequently.
In this drawing, we see a large table at which eight participants take place. The space is limited in anticipation of a group this size (in some schools, there is more space, facilitating larger groups). There is a boundary in the middle of the room: a bookcase approximately one meter in height separates mothers spatially from their small children. This way, the mothers can see their toddlers when they participate in the class, but are disinclined to pick up their children continuously during the class. In this spatial lay out, a part of the strategy is thus apparent: mothers are spatially separated from their children in order for them to have the time to concentrate on the course programme that the teacher has prepared for them and the conversations in which they are to participate. In other words: children are consciously taken out of the transactions as part of the strategies that parent guidance practices are. This separation of mothers and small children is a substantial spatial reduction of chaos in the transaction. It allows the participants to centre their attention on the discussions, assignments and so on that are part of the parent course. The drawing below is an example of a spatial lay out of a room in which much more chaos was allowed and the teacher consequently had a much more difficult task. The teacher here planned a parenting debate meeting in the debate series of the alderman Geluk, discussed in the introduction of chapter 4. In the drawing below, we see a large circle of tables at which a group of mothers take place facing each other. So far, there is not much difference with the lay out of the room above. The difference is that there is a second group of five mothers, sitting at a coffee table. This second group sits with their backs on not only the first group of mothers, but also the parent consultant Ellen and the teacher of the class Joyce. Joyce feels compelled to stand up and navigate the room while talking, because sitting at the large table would disable her to include the second group of mothers. It is necessary for her to raise her voice and ask for everybody’s attention multiple times during this morning. Moreover, there is some antagonism between the first and the second group of women. Both groups do not listen to members of the other group while they speak. Instead, they gossip about each other’s dress size.

Multiple conversations happen simultaneously during this particular morning. Some of this chaos is due to pre-existing relationships of participants in the transaction. The two groups are not formed in this particular transaction, but positioned themselves vis-à-vis each other before, or so it is made clear to me by some comments of mothers present. But at least some of the chaos is made possible by the divided set up of furniture in the room, enabling groups of mothers to separate themselves and leading Joyce to stand up and appropriate much more of a teacher role than she would have liked, she explained to me, because she planned for the women to participate with her in a debate:
“I had prepared something entirely different!” Joyce laughs: “Something like a game set-up to debate (...) but that didn’t quite work out, did it?” “This clearly isn’t working. I mean I had fun, but these women came here to chat and have a good time, not to debate like the alderman would like to see. I am meant to bring the wishes of the alderman together with the wishes of these women, but I’m afraid that is not going to work!”

Joyce explicitly declares this morning a failure when she considers the planned strategy: to debate the issues prepared like the alderman would like to see.

Some of Joyce’s trouble this morning is due to the fact that she had to stand up and walk around the room. In my research, I encountered much uneasiness of professionals with hierarchical relations and consequently also with hierarchical spatial lay outs of the classrooms. The drawing below is an especially salient example of such uneasiness. Miriam starts this meeting at the head of the large table at which I, an intern, a parent consultant and fourteen mothers take place, to introduce the theme of the morning and her plans for the particular activities.
But as the morning progresses, she chooses to move her chair to the side of the table between the parent consultant and a mother (see in the drawing Miriam 1 and Miriam 2). In general, teachers most frequently chose to take place between mothers, facing them at the table.

The professionals that organised the parent guidance practices preferred a spatial lay out that symbolises equality to a spatial lay out that symbolizes hierarchy. The example of the chaotic debate settings show how the organisation of space allowed for disruptions and simultaneity. Several conversations and transactions can take place at the same time, disrupting the class. It is a spatial expression of social relations (cf. Massey, 1994): the two groups of women were formed before and this spatial division necessitates Joyce to take a hierarchical outsider’s position. The most frequent spatial lay out of parent classes is however the circle of equals and this too is a symbolic spatial expression of social relations in which the organisers of the course and the mothers express their will to be equal. This fits the ambitions of many parenting guidance practices: to organise debate and discussion. Teachers usually made sure that the space facilitated this goal. Such a spatial setup minimised their sense of discomfort with hierarchical relations. But professionals, of course, did not participate in the transactions as equal to the mothers. They participated in their role as teachers or experts in the field of pedagogical advice and were expected to do so by the mothers. They negotiated hierarchy and equality, or: authority and equality every day. The will to be equal was almost always translated into the spatial expression of the roundtable. The problem of negotiating authority and equality is further developed in chapter 6.

But there was yet another interesting space/time interconnection that tells us something about parenting guidance practices. Teachers and parent consultants used strategies in De Certeau’s sense and would be able to plan the spatial dimension of the transaction. But they would be able to do so only within a particular timeframe. Often, the classroom would be appropriated
by the mothers before and immediately after the planned course. The following excerpt of my field notes is especially telling in this respect.

When I arrive at 8.25 at the school’s playground, the teacher and intern, Simone and Jolanda, are still outside waiting. It freezes outside; it is a particularly cold morning in March. There is also a group of mothers on the playground smoking cigarettes; some of these mothers are part of the group that Simone, Jolanda and I have acquainted ourselves with during the last five weeks. But Simone and Jolanda stand at least seven or eight meters aside from them. I ask them why they are still standing outside. Simone answers: “Well, there were still some mothers drinking coffee in the room, so we decided to wait outside a bit longer.”

The space of the parent room is organised and divided by Simone and Jolanda as part of their strategy, but only from 8.30 in the morning until approximately 11.30. 8.30 is therefore a symbolic moment in which the social relations of the mothers and the professionals change. Before 8.30, Simone and Jolanda are uncomfortable with the mothers to the extent that they would rather be cold outside than to come in and chat informally with the mothers in a room that is not yet theirs. This has to do with their youth (they are both in their early twenties, the mothers are in their late thirties and forties) and the strong in-group dynamic of this particular group of mothers. But from 8.30 onwards, the dynamic changes. The social relations are turned upside down; Jolanda and Simone establish themselves as teachers, even though they prefer the equality of the circle set-up. This is a particular “envelope” (Massey, 1994: 5) of space-time, in which the time-boundary establishes a different meaning for space. Not all professionals felt as inhibited as Simone and Jolanda, and many were comfortable in the rooms before or after the actual class. But then still, the social relations changed at the symbolic moment in which the teacher would raise her voice to let all participants know that she wanted to start, that from then on, the transaction would be planned and distributed in a particular order and – importantly - called “parenting guidance”. And more often than not, this introduction would include some sort of direction for the spatial division. The teacher would ask the participants to sit, to face her, to move tables around or fetch some more chairs.

**Policy execution - complex transactions**

Parenting guidance practices are a policy strategy of time. Working towards “activity” and “active citizenship” are vital parts of parenting guidance programmes. As a strategy, parent guidance thus aims to influence the use of time of mothers in Rotterdam. They aim to “move” mothers into
“activity”, so that they can produce the next “active” generation of citizens. The course is designed in a certain timed and spaced order. Participants are requested to sit or stand up, face each other or divide into smaller groups and to take “ten minutes” for a certain class element. In practice, however, these interventions are mediated. In this chapter, I have distinguished five mediations located with the mothers: joking, particularising, withdrawing, mirroring and decentring. All these mediations depend on time: on opportunities to be seized to alter transactions, to change what happens in practices. That is not to say that the mothers set out to change the transaction by their interruption, joke or withdrawing. Mediations are not necessarily conscious. However, the change is the result of their influence on the transaction.

And ironically, precisely the overarching goal of the policy interventions, “activation”, is compromised. Professionals aim to “activate” and “move” the mothers into “active citizenship”, but many mediations delay transactions. Joking, mirroring, particularising, decentring and withdrawing all change the planned distribution of time as designed by the teacher. Consequently, mediations often make teachers wait. The power dynamic is especially apparent in this feature of the transactions. As Ehn & Löfgren (2010) noted, waiting tells us something about power balances: making someone wait is a performance of power and it can even be quite an aggressive act. In the transactions described in this chapter, mediations indeed often showed the boundaries of the power of the teachers. At times, there was a temporary reversion of initiative and transactional power. This reversion is limited by time: opportunity must be seized, the planned time sequence of the teacher usually takes over when she reclaims initiative and the power to distribute time and space. Using these opportunities to seize initiative and temporarily reverse power dynamics are powerful tools in transactions. Contrary to what one might expect, many times, teachers are not the ones in charge and mothers are taking initiative, positioning their interpretation of their lives and their relationship with their children as a norm. To see these mediations of mothers as forms of resistance would be to take for granted a certain power distribution and certain forms of consciousness that spring from this distribution. In my observations, the power dynamic was much more complicated. It was regularly turned upside down and initiative to change transactions shifted back and forth between teachers and mothers.

Interestingly, parenting guidance practices set out to speed up mothers, but precisely the dimension of time is what teachers have least control over. Mothers delay the practices continuously by intervening and mediating policy. This is even more the case because so many transactions I encountered were characterised by a level of lethargy and sluggishness. For many reasons, the activities that are to speed up mothers and “move” them into “activity” are, in fact, slow, boring and low-energy. Teachers often feel frustration because of this sluggishness and assign responsibility for it to the mothers who are “difficult to move”.

190
However, the experienced difficulties that come with professional intervention in personal lives and the frustration that professionals feel in the situations in which they work, does not necessarily lead to less faith in policy intervention. I was in fact struck in the field with the enormous trust social workers, pedagogues and teachers had in intervention. While experiencing the limitations of their work every day, and the sluggishness and frustration that are the result of these experiences, professionals in the field remained confident in the possible impact of their work. They often had high hopes and expectations. Likewise, policy makers design policies for intervention in the daily lives of urban inhabitants. And using the repertoire of Dutch paternalism, they have great faith in the possibility of the “elevation” of the next generation.

I have not researched the effectiveness or even the success or failure of the policy practices that I participated in. I was not interested in whether or not these policies “work”: if they produce what they were meant to produce by design. But I was interested in the actual practices, to see what happens when policy ambitions “hit the ground” of, alternatively “enter the room”. To understand parenting guidance as part of urban re-generation as I do in this thesis, an understanding of actual practices has proven crucial. Without this insight in transactions in practices at the street level (cf. Lipsky 1980), government is easily overstated and the immense faith in policy that many of the participants in the chains of translations have is taken at face value by researchers. Intervention in the daily lives of urban inhabitants or citizens anywhere is very complex and policy implementation and policy practices have a dynamic of their own independent of policy goals, professional desires and political ambitions. As I have shown in this chapter, policy is mediated in transactions with the ones targeted by it. As a consequence, the dynamics of practices sometimes lacks dynamism.

Moreover, studies of public policy that lack a sense of transactional dynamics tend to ascribe the workings of policy to an actor or group of actors or, alternatively, to the policy measures themselves. In such cases, research shows that a particular measure “works”, that particular professionals have a particular influence, or that some groups of clients are especially difficult to work with. Those involved in the policy process often do the same: certain groups of parents are “notoriously hard to reach”, difficult to “move” or problems are “tough” and measures “effective”, or not. Another example of such thinking is how in the situations described above, some (aspiring) professionals were frustrated, even angry, with individual mothers not doing what was asked of them. But policy practices (as everything social) are the result of transactions in which a myriad of elements contribute. Especially in classroom settings, professionals and mothers have to work together in sometimes more and sometimes less antagonistic transactions. In this chapter, I have shown the complexity of transactions in policy by focusing on time and, consequently on mediations in order to trace power dynamics. I have scrutinised what happens between mothers
and professionals in classrooms in particular timeslots.

The questions that remain are then: what is it exactly, that is the result of these mediations? What is produced at the end of the chains of translations and series of negotiations that I described in this chapter and the previous one? What is it that mothers and teachers make together within their transactions? Does it matter that mothers and professionals often do not agree on what it means to be a good mother or what a good parent should behave like? Or is there something else at stake? In the next chapter, I answer these questions.