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

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**Publication date**  
2013

[Link to publication](#)

#### **Citation for published version (APA):**

van den Berg, M. A. (2013). *Mothering the post-industrial city: Family and gender in urban re-generation*.

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## **Summary**

### **Mothers, children and the city of the future**

Children and mothers play an important role in policy efforts to regenerate the city. This dissertation deals with this prominence of children and mothers in urban policies in Rotterdam, the Netherlands. It departs from the observation that *mothers*, in particular, matter in urban policy making and the struggle of former industrial cities to reinvent themselves. I was curious about why mothers and children featured so very prominently in urban policies in Rotterdam and also how this resulted in policy practices and what was *done* in these practices. For this purpose, I did participatory, ethnographic research in a range of parenting guidance practices. I was interested in what goes on in the room. What happens when policy ambitions for the city enter a classroom, school kitchen, family home or community centre where “parenting guidance” is taking place? What do professionals such as teachers, pedagogues and social workers produce together with participating mothers? And how does this relate to imagined urban futures and the new post-industrial economy?

In imagining urban futures beyond the industrial past, policy makers devise campaigns, images and buildings and they facilitate businesses. I analyse city marketing and urban planning efforts in addition to my research in parenting guidance practices. But parenting guidance practices form the core of my dissertation as they are ways for cities to *imagine future populations*. When it comes to imagining a future economy beyond industry, concerns about the future labour force rise. These concerns about the city crystallise in parenting guidance practices. Imagining future populations and designing policies to change the characteristics of the population are part of the struggle to depart from the urban industrial past. In Rotterdam, demographic characteristics such as education levels, age and class background are quite explicitly considered the core of the city's problems. These characteristics were of much less import in industrial times, when the harbour provided manual jobs. But cities struggling to stimulate new economies are concerned about such demographics, especially because personalities and social skills and characteristics are pivotal in service sector jobs.

### **Re-generation and genderfication**

In this dissertation I have grasped part the struggle to depart from the industrial past and its consequences for families in terms of urban re-generation. This concept refers to practices that are based on the idea that *generations* can be *policy instruments*. Re-generation is to renew the city by either investing in the children (the next generation) of the current population or replacing the current population of children by better suited children. Urban re-generation efforts are to create a

new and economically successful urban milieu. In it, families and generations are policy tools and mothers form a particular target group. Related is the phenomenon that I termed genderfication. Genderfication is a variation on the concept of gentrification. In general terms, gentrification is a process in which space is produced for more affluent users (cf. Hackworth, 2002: 815). Following this definition of gentrification, I define *genderfication* as the production of space for not only more affluent users, but also for specific gender notions. My research shows that Rotterdam has tried to feminise the city in recent marketing enterprises and urban planning efforts.

### **Reflexive and communicative parenting guidance**

When I participated in the parenting guidance practices that are at the core of this dissertation, I soon identified a common theme to them. However different the practices were, they also had something powerful in common: they were all focused on reflection and communication. As a policy instrument, parenting guidance and parent courses are already a reflexive and communicative intervention: they are meant to prompt discussion, debate, thought and negotiation. But my claim in this dissertation goes further: reflection and communication were *practiced* and *done* in parenting guidance practices. This dissertation is about the work of *doing* reflection and communication.

In the practices in which I participated, there was much laughter, conflict and fierce discussion. The logic of the ones executing the policies was examined and challenged by jokes, particularisations and mirroring mediations. But that does not mean that the practices were unproductive, or sites of conflict only. There was much cooperation too. Even – and especially – in moments of massive disagreement, mothers and professionals produced something together. In my analysis, I focused on this coproduction in transactions between mothers and professionals. I used an analytical framework that was based on theories of ritual to show the ritual-like characteristics of what we did in parenting guidance practices. In between mothers and professionals, a production of *reflexive and communicative subject-positions* took place. I define subject-positions as “ways of doing, being (...) and thinking” (Starfield, 2002: 125) that become available in transactions. The production of reflexive and communicative subject-positions is the common theme of the parenting guidance practices as I researched them. Through *repetitive* transactions of the particular *forms* 1) egalitarian talk, 2) negotiation, 3) debate, 4) evaluation and 5) observation, we opened up the possibility of being communicative and reflexive in the transaction. Whether we debated food, school choice or child abuse, the substance of the practices was subject to particular *forms*. We *practiced* communication and reflection: the point was that we engaged in a *negotiation* or *talked* in an egalitarian fashion. Negotiating meanings or mirroring logics mediated policy in the sense that it changed what the policy executors set out to do. But these

mediations *contributed* to the common theme of reflection and communication. For example: by negotiating the particular meaning of the idea of marriage, a mother could mediate the logic of a particular meeting that a professional teacher had designed. On first sight, it may be tempting to read this as a form of resistance or at least serious disagreement. But the interesting point is that through participating in a negotiation, the mother and professional coproduce the possibility of being reflexive and communicative: they coproduce reflexive and communicative subject-positions. Phrased differently yet: they practice *being* and *doing* communicative and reflexive.

### **An elective affinity with a post-industrial vocational ethic**

Parenting guidance as a practice is located in a place and time where industrial production is moved elsewhere and new jobs and careers are available in an interactive service economy. The production of reflexive and communicative subject-positions show a remarkable resemblance to descriptions of what is expected of employees in an interactive service economy. I think of this relationship between the production of reflexive and communicative subject-positions and the twenty-first century vocational ethic as a *Wahlverwandtschaft*: an elective affinity. Reflexive and communicative mothering, it seems, is what mothering a post-industrial city entails.