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Losing What You Never Had

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8 Losing What You Never Had

How A Strike Changed Management's (Perception of Their) Network Position

*Agnes Akkerman, Katerina Manevska,
Kirsten Thommes, and Roderick Sluiter*

Introduction

In this chapter we describe the consequences a strike had on the social position of middle and lower management. Research into the social structural position of middle and lower management during strikes is, to our best knowledge, rare, or not non-existent. Although case studies of strikes are abundant (e.g., Brunnsden & Hill, 2009; Francis, 1985; Getman, 1999; MacDowell, 1993; Waddington et al., 1994), the focus on the relations between lower management and workers, is never explicit. This question of how social relations between managers and workers change after a strike is especially interesting from a relational perspective on labour relations. The core idea behind such a relational perspective is that workplace inequalities are not ingrained in formal positions, but take shape in the relations between the people who hold those positions (cf. Tomaskovic-Devey, 2014). Previous research has shown the importance of the social relations between supervisors and subordinates for worker resistance (e.g., Roscigno & Hodson, 2004). By focusing on the consequences of a strike for the social relations between supervisors and subordinates, we investigate to what extent attempts to alter (certain aspects of) workplace inequalities in turn affect workplace social relations. A strike makes existing power relations manifest between (lower) management and their fellow workers. It is the occasion at which managers who view strike participation as an expression of disloyalty, learn who of his subordinates is actual loyal, and who is not. At the same time, it forces managers to “reveal” whose side they are on, by either joining, supporting or objecting the strike, and thus actively demonstrating whom they identify with and are loyal to: the employer (and higher level management) or their fellow workers. These subordinate workers may view members of lower management as a fellow worker, expecting them to share the same norms on worker solidarity, strike participation and views towards the employer.

The explicit and visible choice to join a strike or not, is often regarded by workers as an expression of solidarity, or a lack thereof with fellow workers (Akkerman et al., 2013; Thommes et al., 2014). Examples are many that the lack of solidarity changes social relations between workers on strike and those who continue working during a strike. Such social crises are known to be quite persistent after the formal strike is settled (Barling & Milligan, 1987; Fowler et al., 2009; Kelloway et al., 1993). Previous studies into the after effects of strikes signal the destruction of communication ties between strikers and non-participants by way of retaliation for their lack of solidarity, or more in general, for deviating from norms on strike participation (Thommes & Akkerman, 2018). The social strains and the destruction of social ties severely affect cooperation and productivity and worker well-being (Thommes et al., 2015). It is thus highly likely that a strike is a management crisis, affecting (lower) management's ability to steer and monitor their teams. For example, not joining fellow workers in a strike – be it motivated by their role conception of supervisor or their identification with the employer – may lead to disappointment and distrust by the subordinates on strike, leading to retaliatory shutting down communication (Thommes & Akkerman, 2018). Such cutting off of communication ties severely deteriorates managers' structural position in the social network, potentially negatively impacting the efficiency with which managers and supervisors communicate with their subordinates. It is unclear, however, how such power struggles affect management's position in the social network of workers.

Social network analyses can assist in describing and understanding the structural implications of a strike for managers' position in their social network. As such, this chapter investigates the consequences for lower management leadership position by describing their position in the private and work-related communication networks. We supplement our network analyses with quantitative survey material and qualitative material collected by way of interviews. Our research question is: What are the consequences of a strike for management structural social position.

The social structure of the workforce

The case study concerns the network of employees of a cleaning company, based on a university campus in the Netherlands. The strike in 2012 in this company was part of a national strike in the cleaning sector. The strike started at January 1st and ended April 17th, lasting 105 days, making it the longest sector-wide strike since 1933 in the Netherlands. The main demands of the trade union FNV concerned a wage increase of 5% and paid short sick leave, both carefully framed by the union as a fight for respect. At the time of the strike, the company employed 60 employees and additionally hired six through a temp-agency. The workforce consisted of four cleaning teams, and one mobile team supporting

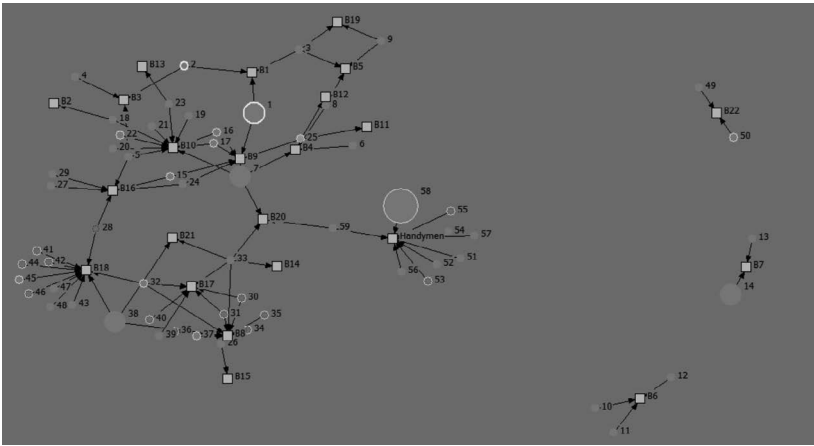


Figure 8.1 The workplaces and the cleaners working in them

the other teams and operating heavy cleaning machinery (handymen). Figure 8.1 shows how the workers were assigned to 21 different buildings spread all over the campus at the time just before the strike started.¹ Some of the workers cleaned multiple buildings, presenting them opportunities to connect to the workers cleaning the different buildings.

This chapter builds on the findings of Born et al. (2016) and Thommes and Akkerman (2018), who analysed the group effects of this strike in the company. Born et al. (2016), analysing how the composition of the network affects strike participation, observe a pre-existing cluster of cleaners who would later on become strikers and a mixed group of strikers and non-strikers. Such a cleavage was observed, although to differing extents, in both the private and work-related communication network. These pre-existing ties facilitated communication about the strike. In addition, Born et al. (2016) observe that, with regard to the trust network, already a clearer distinction between subgroups of non-strikers and strikers was pre-existent before the strike.

Thommes and Akkerman (2018) analyse the changes in the work-related and private-related communication network and find that strikers and non-strikers adapted their networks according to their strike behaviour: strikers reduced the intensity and the number of connections with non-strikers and vice versa, while ties were established after the strike among the group of strikers, as well as among the non-strikers. Thommes and Akkerman (2018) attribute these network changes to the process of social approval and social disapproval: strikers reduced their ties to prevent social disapproval of non-strikers, whereas they built and intensified ties to receive the approval of other strikers. The same is observed for non-strikers: they cut ties with strikers to avoid punishment for not participating in the strike. The authors found that

in particular the private communication network suffered from loss of ties between the strikers and the non-strikers. Compared to the private communication network, the work communication between strikers and non-strikers was maintained but became less frequent – a difference the authors attribute to the notion that quitting all communication is probably more consequential in work-related communication, while workers can afford an all or nothing strategy for their private communication.

These changes in communication networks further materialised in persistent group cleavages after the strike between those who went on strike and those who did not, in particular at a cleaning site where about half of the cleaners participated and the other half did not participate in the strike. Previously shared coffee breaks ceased to exist, and (former) strikers called the non-strikers into account and vice versa. In addition, previous bullying reappeared in the form of the stealing of working materials of trolleys. Most cleaners worked with their own trolley with cleaning materials (e.g., soap, stocks of toilet paper), and on previous occasions, some cleaners took materials from their colleagues' trolleys. This was perceived as theft and a severe instance of obstruction because getting new materials from the storage room in the basement of the 20-plus floor building was quite time consuming. The manager succeeded in ending the stealing – which he considered to be caused by personal conflicts and frustration – by letting the cleaners store their materials in a locker when they went home. Shortly after the strike, the stealing of stock material of trolleys started again, with cleaners now hoarding materials in their lockers.

Thus, previous studies on the case conclude that the strike resulted in sharp cleavages between the strikers and the workers who did not participate in the strike. These cleavages were visible in the communication networks before the strike, and to some extent explain who participated in the strike and who did not. These cleavages further deepened after the strike. While the two groups stopped communicating about private matters and reduced the frequency of communication about work-related matters, the workers started “communicating” their frustration and anger through cutting off ties, and obstruction of each other's work. Our present study focusses on how the manager's and the supervisors' network position is affected by this crisis in the social structure at the work floor.

Data and method

With permission of the manager the researchers interviewed 59 employees who agreed to participate in the research. Seven employees refused to participate. Each participant was interviewed individually, during which a semi-structured questionnaire was completed. This questionnaire consisted of regular survey questions on e.g., attitudes and network

questions, and question regarding demographics. In addition, observational information was collected during meetings, and briefings of the manager with the workers during and after the strike. The fieldwork for the first wave of the questionnaire was completed between March 23rd and April 24th, by asking the respondent to retrospectively report on the network as it was 3 months before the strike. The second wave was carried out between June 25th and July 13th, thus between 2, 5, and 3 months after the strike was settled.

In this study, we analyse the network position of the supervisors and the manager in the work-related communication network and the private communication network. Both data were collected using a list of names of each worker, on which each respondent was asked to estimate the frequency of their communication with each co-worker. For the work-related connection, we asked “How often do you talk with [alter] about work?” and for the private connections “How often do you talk about private matters?”. Respondents indicated communication frequency on a 1-7-point scale. For this study we dichotomised these valued measures into 1 (tie present) and 0 (tie absent). The questions do not allow for bi-directional interpretation of the network ties (as we are not able to distinguish who initiated the communication, nor whose private matter was talked about). However, the bi-directional data allows us to differentiate the perspective of the workers on their communication with their supervisor and the manager, from the perspective of the supervisors and manager themselves. We use the following network measures:

Ego’s *indegree*, reporting the number of workers who “nominated” ego as someone they talked with about work, and private matters respectively. Indegree centrality is commonly used as an indicator of Ego’s prestige (Wasserman & Faust, 1994, p. 175) in social networks. In addition to ego’s overall indegree, we distinguished the indegree by (future) strikers. Next, we use ego’s *outdegree*, reporting the number of workers Ego reports talking to about work, and private matters respectively. The outdegree centrality thus gives Ego’s own perspective on their structural position. Again, we distinguished the outdegree by (future) strikers. Commonly, the indegree is considered to be a more valid measurement of the network connection because Ego’s perspective would be more susceptible to desirability biases (Kuhnt & Brust, 2014). We used UCINET 6 for Windows for calculating the network measures, and NetDraw 2.175 for the network graphs (Borgatti 2002; Borgatti et al. 2002).

The network position of the supervisors and the manager

Figure 8.1 shows how the workers are connected to each other through their work places. Some workers work in multiple buildings and thus connect workers of two, or sometimes even three buildings. Other workers work solely in one building and depend on joint meetings for meeting

their fellow workers. The manager and supervisors, the larger nodes, differ in how they connect with the workers, at least according to the buildings they work in. In particular supervisor #38 connects to a lot of workers through supervising the work in multiple buildings, while the manager's (# 58) office is located in the building where the mobile handymen are based. The physical layout of the workplace displayed by [Figure 8.1](#), may constrain the workers from communicating with each other, while communication between workers also may happen in joint meetings, or on fortuitous encounters, and prior established work relations (e.g., when workplace were assigned differently). The strikers are concentrated in buildings B18, B15, and B8, all supervised by supervisor 4 (#38). Some additional workers are at strike within the mobile group of handymen and a more remote striker works in several of the other buildings. This suggests that physical proximity enhances strike participation, and to a lesser extent union membership. Strike participation coincides largely with union membership, although some union members – under which one supervisor and the manager – do not participate in the strike.

As an illustration, [Figures 8.2](#) and [8.3](#) display the private communication networks before and after the strike, and [Figures 8.4](#) and [8.5](#) display the work-related communication networks before and after the strike. Visual inspection of the graphs already demonstrates the loss of ties between the strikers in the lowest subnetwork and the manager and supervisor #38. [Table 8.1](#) allows for a more specific account of the network changes.

The workforce is led by one manager (#58) and four lower-level supervisors. We report on their network and the changes therein after the strike on all supervisors, but will focus on the networks of the manager

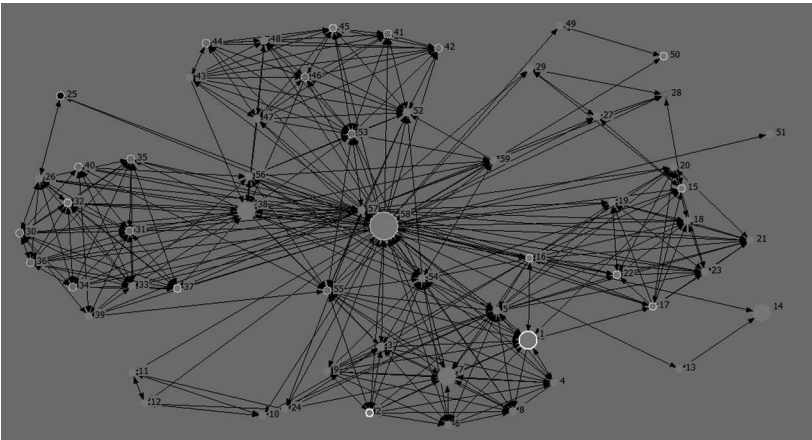


Figure 8.2 Private communication network before the strike

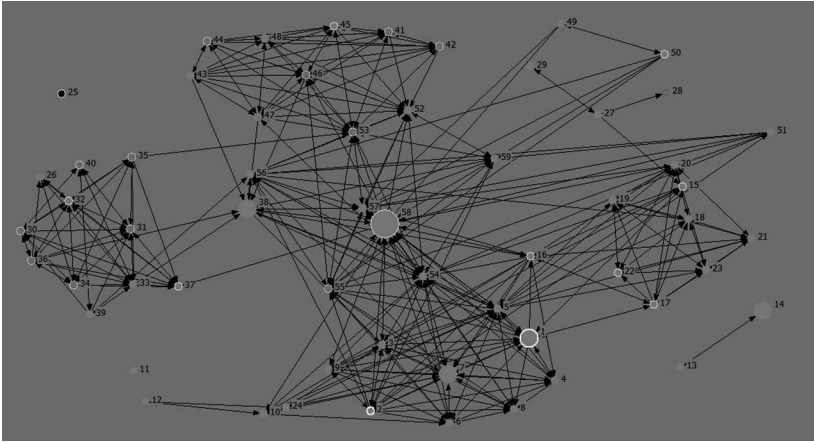


Figure 8.3 Private communication after the strike

and supervisor #38, who were connected with the strikers and experienced the most network change.

The manager (#58) is a 54-year-old Dutch man. He works fulltime (40 hours per week) on a permanent contract. He has been working for the company since 2008. He attained higher level professional education. Before the strike, the manager reports speaking about private matters with each of the workers in the network (outdegree), while just 18 workers report talking to him about private matters. After the strike, the manager reports speaking about private matters with much less workers than he did before the strike: his private outdegree ties drop from 58 to 19 in total, and with the strikers specifically, from

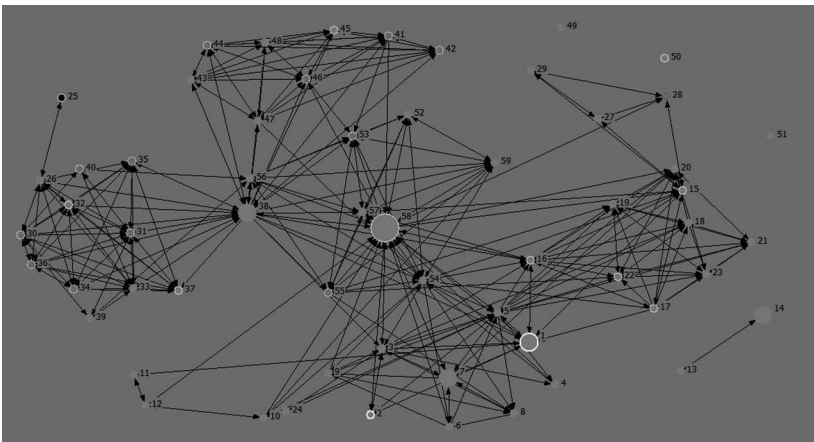


Figure 8.4 Work related communication before the strike

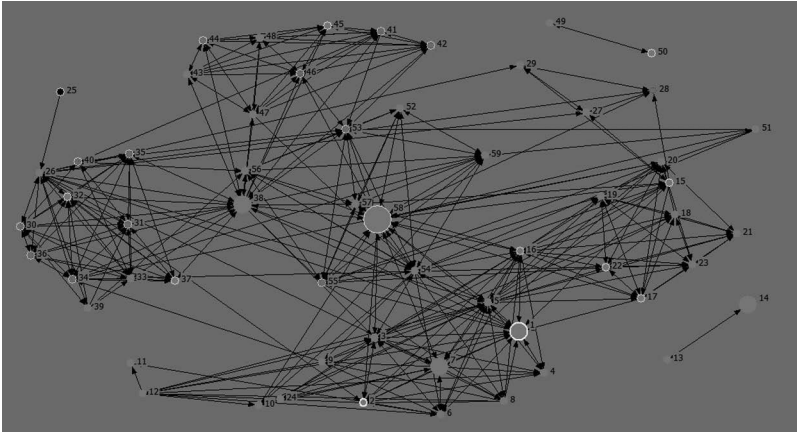


Figure 8.5 Work related communication after the strike

14 to 3. His indegree (the number of workers mentioning the manager as someone they speak with about private matters) rises, with a small reduction among the strikers. This suggests that the manager perceives a dramatic decline in private communication between himself and the workers. Considering the differences between number of workers mentioning the manager as someone they talk about private matters at the beginning of the strike, and the number of workers the manager reports himself talking to, he might have overestimated his position in the private communication network. After the strike the size of the perceived network (outdegree) seems more in line with the network from the perspective of the workers.

Table 8.1 Ego network measures of the manager and the supervisors

Ego (node #)	Time	Private communication ties (ties to strikers)		Work-related communication ties (ties to strikers)	
		Indegree	Outdegree	Indegree	Outdegree
Manager (#58)	T1	18 (4)	58 (14)	21 (4)	18 (4)
	T2	22 (3)	19 (3)	17 (4)	18 (4)
Supervisor 1 (#1)	T1	14 (1)	15 (1)	8 (1)	9 (1)
	T2	13 (0)	17 (1)	15 (0)	15 (1)
Supervisor 2 (#7)	T1	11 (0)	11 (1)	6 (0)	5 (0)
	T2	12 (0)	13 (1)	8 (0)	11 (0)
Supervisor 3 (#14)	T1	2 (0)	2 (0)	1 (0)	1 (0)
	T2	1 (0)	1 (0)	1 (0)	1 (0)
Supervisor 4 (#38)	T1	11 (2)	19 (9)	14 (8)	27 (11)
	T2	8 (4)	9 (0)	13 (5)	26 (11)

Thus, as we assumed that the times the manager is nominated as the least biased measure, the manager did not so much lose ties with workers after the strike, but likely just gained a more realistic perspective on his private communication network. Before the strike, he considered himself to be the centre of the network, having established private connections with everyone in the company, reaching all his subordinates in just one step and thus having an optimally efficient network communicating with his subordinates.

The worker and manager perspective on the network are less different for the work-related communication network – at least with regard to the number of ties. The changes in the work-related network, as well as the incongruences between the connections between the managers and the workers, seem less dramatic, suggesting a more stable communication network.

Supervisor #38 is a 35-year-old Dutch man. He works fulltime (40 hours per week) on a permanent contract. He has been working for the company since 2008, and since 2010 in his current team. The private communication network of this supervisor shows a similar incongruence between the size of the network in his perception and that of the network based on the connections mentioned by the workers. Supervisor #38 seems to overestimate his private network before the strike, like the manager did, shown by the low proportion of the outgoing ties that are reciprocated. After the strike, supervisor #38 reduces his outgoing private communication network to half its pre-strike size, and in particular cuts off ties with the workers who participated in the strike, although the number of strikers who nominated supervisor #38 as someone, they talked to about private matters actually doubled.

Supervisor #38 perceives to have quite an extensive communication network, in particular in the work-related communication network. Again, he reports having more work-related communication than workers report having with him, although the numbers of contacts remained more or less stable after the strike.

Supervisor # 1 is a 67-year-old Dutch woman, working on a temporary contract (after her retirement) for 29.5 hours a week. She has been working for the company since 2008, and is a long-term member of the largest union. She works in B1 and B9. Her private communication network, existing of one striker only, changed somewhat. Her connection between the strikers remained after the strike. Her work-related communication network grew after the strike: she doubled her ties, primarily to non-strikers, but also to one striker. Compared to the manager, and supervisor #38 her perception of her private and work-related network is more accurate, even though her network is at least equal in size of that of #38.

Supervisor # 7 is a 50-year-old Dutch woman, working on a permanent contract. She worked for the company since 2008. She works

20 hours per week, and works in four different buildings (B4, B10, and B20). She is not a member to a union. Both her private and work-related communication network show some minor expansions, except from the outgoing work ties, which doubled.

Supervisor # 14 is a 35-year-old Dutch woman. She works 30 hours a week on a permanent contract. She has been working for the company since 2008, exclusively in B7. This supervisor, is only connected to one fellow worker. This seems a little odd for a supervisor, but might have to do with the size of the workplace and her working hours: apparently, she supervises the work in this rather large building she cleans together with one fellow worker.

The overall pattern that arises from this analysis is that those in higher ranked positions, who seemed to overestimate their private communication ties before the strike, have corrected their perception after the strike, which is particularly true for their private communication with strikers. The strike thus seems to work as a corrective for this misperception. At the same time, there were relatively little changes in workers' private and work-related communication with manager/supervisor, both among strikers and non-strikers. As such, and again taking the indegree measurement as the more accurate one, rather than changing the relational structure at work, the strike seems to have realigned perceptions of this relational structure. In what follows, we reflect on this finding and propose some preliminary explanations for it.

Conclusion and discussion

This chapter aimed at demonstrating how the analytical tools of social network analyses can help us advance our understanding of the dynamics of power relations at the work floor. We analysed the communication on private and work-related matters of employees of a cleaning company. We compared the size of their networks before and after the strike. In particular, the size of the private communication network between the manager and supervisor #38 and the strikers fell dramatically after the strike, at least from their perspective. The number of strikers that mentioned them as someone they talked about was not as large in the first place, and only changed marginally after the strike. In this sense, the strike might have served as a reality check for this manager and supervisor.

Several explanations are possible for this remarkable pattern. First of all, the hierarchical position and the associated power over the subordinates might have led subordinates to suggest a mutual level of intimacy that was less genuine than the manager and supervisor #38 believed. The strike, forcing workers and the managers to take sides, may have confronted the managers with the difference in norms and group identification, also known as “expectancy violation” (Burgoon, 2015). Thus, the

strike may have served as an occasion in which the already existing differences in norms and group identification became manifest. Violation of expected similarity is known to increase the social distance between ego and the violator. To add insult to injury, the bully-behaviour reappeared after the strike, expanding the articulation of differences in norms and group identification beyond the timeframe as well as the scope of the strike itself.

Another explanation is that manager and supervisors may feel challenged by the group of strikers who openly disassociated from their employer, the other workers, and organisational leadership. The obvious troubles in the organisation of work caused by the strike, and the associated loss of control of management, may have embarrassed the supervisors and the manager (Hsiung, 2012). Such embarrassment will be aggravated when supervisors require their subordinates to take a more submissive disposition at the workplace and for that reason grant their workers less entitlement to have and express their voice (Sluiter et al., 2020).

Another remarkable observation is that the perception bias of the female supervisors was much less than that of the male manager and male supervisor. Of course, future studies should determine whether such a pattern is found more often. Here, we merely speculate about a potential explanation if this were to be a more general pattern. An important piece of information in this respect is that almost all workers in our study are female. As such, in the case of the male manager and the male supervisor, a double hierarchy might be in play: namely the workplace hierarchy as well as a gender hierarchy. This might increase the impetus for the female workers to take a submissive stance towards their supervisors, which is often accompanied by socially desirable behaviour. If this is indeed the case, both workplace power structures and outside work power structures should be taken into account when analysing social relations at work. In line with other suggestions in this direction (e.g., Kalleberg, 2009, 10), this asks for considering the role of intersectional power structures.

Our analysis and the validity of its conclusions are highly dependent on the quality of the network data gathered. Some critical remarks on this are in place. First of all, our interpretation of the differences between indegree and outdegree as resulting from differences of perspective of the manager and supervisors on the one hand, and the workers on the other hand. While such interpretations are common in social network analysis, an alternative explanation for such inconsistencies is that they result from the validity of the measurement, i.e., the interview question.

Another critical remark concerns the level of causal inference possible from the data. First, the fieldwork was carried out when the strike was already taking place. While the respondents were asked at the first measurement moment to retrospectively report their ties as they existed three

months *before* the strike, it is uncertain whether the recollection of the respondents is biased, e.g., by the conflict itself, that at that moment already was going on. Second, alternative explanations for the change in the network position of the manager and the supervisors are possible. Networks tend to be dynamic by nature, and network change is continuous, for instance due to encounters, or homophily, that is, the tendency to connect to people who are similar, e.g., in gender, age, or behaviour (Born et al., 2016). Although a previous study was able to control for homophily to some extent (Thommes & Akkerman, 2018), attributing network changes to one particular event, such as this case, the strike, remains difficult.

Despite these limitations, our study illustrates the value of using social network analysis to study social relations at the work floor. Furthermore, our study shows that, in some cases, perceptions of social relations differ between supervisors and subordinates. As a potential explanation for this we suggested that some supervisors only recognise the role of workplace power structures for their social relations at work in situations where the power structure is made explicit. This may be part of a wider existing social dynamic in which supervisors think to be well-connected to their subordinates, while workers are more hesitant in their communication ties with supervisors, being aware of what they could lose when intentionally or unintentionally provoking their supervisor in any way. Future research could further elaborate on this idea, thereby also considering our suggestion on the role of intersectional power structures.

Note

1. For a more elaborate description of the strike please refer to Thommes and Akkerman (2018).

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