1 **Revisiting the notion of social cohesion in community sport? A**

2 **qualitative study on the lived experiences of participants**

3 **Abstract**

4 Research has focused on the question if and how leisure can create social

5 cohesion and can alleviate cultural segregation in divided community contexts.

6 Community sport in particular is believed to create socio-cultural cohesiveness,

7 as it aims at a sense of community, a task in which regular sports often seem to

8 fail. However, the experiences of participants in relation to socio-cultural

9 cohesiveness in community sport remain absent in the existing body of research.

10 This article provides insights into those experiences, by drawing on a qualitative

11 study in Flanders, Belgium. Based on the findings, we challenge the one-sided

12 focus on socio-cultural cohesiveness to obtain a sense of community, as the

13 perspectives of participants reveal that also political and economic dimensions of

14 cohesion are relevant, next to socio-cultural dimensions. We argue that

15 community cannot be reduced to socio-cultural cohesion, but should be

16 understood from the intersection between cultural, economic and political

17 dimensions of cohesion. Implications for practice, both in relation to community

18 sport and the broader leisure field and further research are given.

19 Keywords: Community sport, community, diversity, social cohesion, socio-

20 cultural cohesiveness

21 **Introduction**

22 In late modern society, the question whether and how leisure can create social cohesion

23 and can alleviate cultural segregation in divided community contexts has gained

24 importance within leisure research (f.e. Burdsey, 2008; Meir & Fletcher, 2017;

25 Spracklen, Long & Hylton, 2014; Velija, Ratna, & Flintoff, 2012). At the same time,

26 however, studies have repeatedly shown that young people's leisure time spending in

27 organised contexts, such as sporting, reading, playing music, attending theater, etc., is

28 socio-economically and culturally structured (see, amongst others, Dworking, Larson &

29 Hansen, 2003; Eccles, Barber, Stone & Hunt, 2003; Mahoney, 2000; Morris, 2015;

30 Roggemans, Smits, Spruyt & Van Droogenbroeck, 2013; Van de Walle, 2012).

31 Especially young people in socially vulnerable situations (i.e., young people from

32 families with a lower socio-economic position and young people with a migration

33 background) seem to be generally underrepresented in organised leisure activities

34 (Bennett, Lutz, & Jayaram, 2012). As a reaction to this, several Western countries have

35 witnessed the introduction of alternative activities aimed at reaching the so-called non-

36 participating young people. In this article, we focus on the example of community sport,

37 which is an alternative provider of low threshold sport activities on a local level. It is

38 developed as an answer to the exclusionary effects of traditional sports, mainly

39 organised in the form of club sport (Burdsey, 2008; Donnelly & Coakley, 2002;

40 Spracklen et al., 2014), on socially vulnerable young people (Haudenhuyse et al., 2018).

41 In particular, community sport is believed to tackle these exclusionary effects by

42 installing socio-cultural cohesiveness, or else, a 'sense of community' (Kelly, 2010,

43 p.135) on the basis of processes of trust, cultural learning and shared identities

44 (Haudenhuyse, Theeboom & Skille, 2014; Meir and Fletcher, 2017).

45   However, research on community-based sport programs has been dominated by

46 the perspectives of coordinators and adult mentors, lacking the voices and experiences

47 of the young participants themselves (Meir & Fletcher, 2017; Ratna, 2016; Salmon,

48 Booth, Phongsavan, Murphy, & Timperio, 2007). This article aims to address this

49 research gap by reporting on a qualitative study on the experiences of participants with

50 regard to the socio-cultural cohesiveness that emerged through the practice of

51 community sport, in three community sport initiatives in Flanders (the Dutch-speaking

52 part of Belgium).

53   The article is comprised of four sections. In the first section, we give an

54 overview of the current debates regarding the ability of leisure and sport in general and

55   community sport in particular to contribute to socio-cultural cohesiveness. The second

56   part defines the research methodology after which we present the findings of our

57   qualitative study. The last section contains the discussion and conclusion of the article.

58   **The relationship between leisure, (community) sport and socio-cultural**

59   **cohesiveness**

60   *The cross-cultural potential of leisure*

61   Several scholars have argued that in late modern times, the social bonds between

62   individuals, formed through traditional structures (work, family, tradition) have eroded,

63   due to processes of privatization, activation and liberalization (Arai & Pedlar, 2003;

64   Lorenz, 2013). This disembedding of traditional social ties suggests that social bonds

65   are no longer "naturally given" (Lorenz, 2013, p. 279) and thus need to be reconstructed

66   by social professionals and practices in order to (re)create structures of solidarity and

67   democracy (Lorenz, 2013). This process of disembedding further implies that

68   citizenship has become a matter of individuals' autonomous choice rather than a matter

69   of kinship, leading to uncertainty with regard to people's sense of belonging. Moreover,

70   this uncertainty has become exacerbated by the arise of hybrid identities in the

71   European multicultural project (Burdsey, 2008). As a result, there is a growing concern

72   that social cohesion is threatened by these growing levels of diversity and

73   multiculturalism (Council of Europe, 2000; Markus & Kirpitchenko, 2007) or else, the

74   heterogeneity between and within populations with regard to their identity, heritage

75   values, traditions, languages and ways of life (Council of Europe, 2000).

76   Arai and Pedlar (2003) argue that this individualism and the enlarged focus on

77   individual benefits, choice and autonomy have come to dominate the research field and

78   practice of leisure in the twenty-first century. Simultaneously, there is a strong belief

79   that leisure can re-implement the idea of community in society, not in the sense of

80   reinstalling traditional ties but rather by practicing a notion of community that combines

81   individual freedom and collectiveness (Arai & Pedlar, 2003; Denham, 2001; Burdsey,

82   2008). This belief stems from a communitarian perspective, in which social justice,

83   collective well-being and social cohesion are perceived as the foundation of community

84   (Arai & Pedlar, 2003). As a result, leisure research has focused on the question if and

85   how leisure can create social cohesion and can alleviate cultural segregation in divided

86   community contexts (f.e. Meir & Fletcher, 2017; Spracklen et al., 2015; Burdsey, 2008;

87   Velija et al., 2012). In doing so, scholars plead for the development of overarching

88   shared values, goals and visions. Markus and Kirpitchenko (2007) have referred to this

89   shared basis as the socio-cultural sphere, as one of three dimensions of social cohesion,

90   next to the economic and political sphere, respectively pointing at the distribution of

91   goods, services and conditions and at the level of political and social involvement

92   (Markus & Kirpitchenko, 2007). This socio-cultural cohesiveness of society refers to a

93   high sense of belonging, attachment and inclusion. Research has shown the potential of

94   leisure to bring individuals together around values and goals and to "re-ignite collective

95   endeavor and restore civic engagement" (Arai & Pedlar, 2003, p. 198). More

96   specifically, it is argued that leisure might install "cross-cultural interaction" (Denham,

97   2001, p. 28), through practices of shared meanings, in which individuals can participate

98   independently of their gender, culture, class and age (Arai & Pedlar, 2003).

99   Giving people a sense of belonging is especially considered important for

100   immigrants and ethnic minority groups across Europe (Spracklen et al., 2014).

101   However, Mata-Codesal, Tiesler, and Peperkamp (2015) have been critical with regard

102   to the often functional approach to leisure as a way to adapt and assimilate migrants,

103   without considering the meaning of leisure in the negotiation of migrants' "personal,

104 social, cultural preferences, safety, recognition and sense of belonging" (p. 1). For

105 migrants in particular, leisure is believed to, not only act as an escape from their isolated

106 conditions but to create self and community identification (Mata-Codesal et al., 2015).

107 ***Sport, the best thing since sliced bread?***

108 Within the broad spectrum of leisure, physical recreation is often considered to be more

109 adequate in giving young people and children this sense of belonging, especially those

110 that have been excluded from society (Donnelly & Coakley, 2002; Spracklen et al.,

111 2014). Herein, sport is perceived as an embodied practice that can engage excluded

112 groups in a bodily manner (Mata-Codesal et al., 2015). According to the Commission of

113 the European Communities (2007): "Sport provides citizens with opportunities to

114 interact and join social networks; it helps immigrants to develop relations with other

115 members of society; and it constitutes a tool for reaching out to the underprivileged or

116 groups at risk of or facing discrimination." For example, research shows that sport can

117 help ethnic minorities to negotiate their hybrid senses of identity (Burdsey, 2010;

118 Fletcher, 2011).

119   Research on this is dominantly focused on social capital in general, and bonding

120 and bridging capital in particular (f.e. Misener and Doherty, 2009: Okayasu et al., 2010;

121 Spracklen et al., 2014). Social capital refers to the development of shared norms and

122 trust (Putnam, 2000) and, in the light of socio-cultural cohesiveness, the sharing of

123 inter-cultural knowledge (Spracklen et al., 2014). Whereas bonding capital then points

124 at sharing values with people alike oneself, bridging capital refers to sharing values and

125 norms between people from diverse backgrounds (Putnam, 2000).

126   However, this is where the double-edged potential of sport comes into play.

127 Whereas sport is often acknowledged for its so-called inherently positive force in the

128 establishment of social cohesion, sports can actually produce exclusionary effects when

129   "intra-community cohesion takes precedence over cross-cultural engagement"

130   (Burdsey, 2008, p. 264), or else, when too much bonding makes it impossible to bridge.

131   In Burdsey's (2008) research for example, the cross-cultural interaction between

132   participants during the Amsterdam Worlds Cup football tournament is described as

133   "[…] unpredictable, contingent and ephemeral and, for the main part, [something that]

134   occurs between different minority ethnic groups, rather than between them and white

135   ones" (p. 273). Spracklen et al. (2014) further state that this dominant intra-cultural

136   cohesion exacerbates elitism, otherness, hegemony and exclusion on the basis of status

137   and class. Whereas sport is believed to have the potential for the "articulation and

138   contestation of ethno-cultural identities" (Burdsey, 2008, p. 273), bonding capital seems

139   to obstruct bridging capital exactly when it is formed along the line of ethno-cultural

140   affiliations (Donnelly and Coakley, 2002). A dangerous consequence of this is, on the

141   one hand, the conception of cohesion as homogeneity and on the other hand, the

142   favouring of this homogeneity over inclusive multiculturalism, leading to the exclusion

143   of minority groups (Burdsey, 2008; Donnelly & Coakley, 2002; Fletcher, 2011, Perks,

144   2007; Spracklen et al., 2014). Interpreting cohesion as homogeneity goes right against

145   the notion of socio-cultural cohesiveness in which belonging, inclusion and togetherness

146   are central values (Markus & Kirpitchenko, 2007). This seems to reveal a less flawless

147   and rather dark side of sport (Putnam, 2000) of which socially vulnerable young people

148   are the biggest scapegoats (Crabbe, 2007).

149   ***Building community ties through community sport***

150   Based on the observation that socially vulnerable young people are underrepresented in

151   traditional sport clubs, community sport was introduced in Western European societies

152   (Crabbe, 2007). Although an international definition of community sport is non-

153   existent, there is a common ground on the basis of five characteristics: (1) working

154 need-driven, (2) enabling collaboration between actors in the fields of sport, welfare,

155 youth and the community, (3) using a variety of organisational formats, (4) promoting a

156 notion of sport which goes beyond a mere technical interpretation, and (5) using

157 infrastructural facilities (Hylton & Totten, 2001; Theeboom, Haudenhuyse, & De Knop,

158 2010). Thus, in comparison to traditional sports, community sport is a "flexible,

159 adaptable, informal consultative, people-centred approach" (Bramham, Hylton, Jackson,

160 & Nesti, 2001, p. 96). Community sport attains to provide an answer to the failed access

161 of vulnerable young people to regular sports. This is deemed important as excluded

162 children and young people are believed to reap the presumed benefits of leisure in that

163 manner (Donnelly & Coakley, 2002). On an international level, there is a widespread

164 consensus that community sport cannot only provide access but can tackle the

165 processes, which lie at the basis of this exclusion (Spaaij, 2013). One of the main

166 strategies to do so is to install socio-cultural cohesiveness (Markus & Kirpitchenko,

167 2007). Community sport aims at enhancing a "sense of community" (Kelly, 2010, p.

168 135) on a local level (Meir and Fletcher, 2017). Notwithstanding the similarities

169 between regular and community sports, community sport literature contains some

170 specific ideas on how to deal with diversity in particular. Spaaij, Magee, Farquharson,

171 Jeanes, Lusher and Storr (2016, p. 3) describe how community sport is a feasible

172 context for implementing diversity work", described by Mor Barak (2014) (as cited in

173 Spaaij et al. 2016, p. 3) as the "actions that are aimed at creating greater diversity of

174 members from various backgrounds […]". Thus, community sport initiatives provide a

175 context in which diversity is embraced (Spaaij, 2013), leading to the widespread

176 assumption that community sport can in fact build bridging capital between people with

177 diverse backgrounds (Beutler, 2008), by stimulating processes of trust, cultural learning

178 and shared identities (Haudenhuyse, Theeboom, & Skille, 2014; Meir & Fletcher,

179   2017). Community sport even more so distinguishes itself from traditional sports by its

180   community-driven approach (Haudenhuyse & Theeboom, 2015; Kelly, 2010; Meir &

181   Fletcher, 2017) and the establishment of community ties through this approach (Kelly,

182   2010; Spaaij, 2013), leading to an enlarged sense of connectivity within the community

183   on a level that exceeds that of the activities (Misener & Doherty, 2009).

184   However, with regard to this establishment of socio-cultural cohesiveness

185   through community sport, it remains unclear how this is formed. Whereas research on

186   the contribution of community sport towards social cohesion in general is scant and

187   indistinctive (Dukic, McDonald, & Saaij, 2017; Coraza & Dyer, 2017), the experiences

188   of the participants themselves remain particularly underexplored as most of the research

189   concentrates on the experiences of practitioners, coaches and managers (f.e. Bolton,

190   Fleming, & Elias, 2008; Nadeau et al., 2016). However, as Meir and Fletcher (2017, p.

191   17) state "the only way to fully extrapolate what is required and, therefore, to instigate

192   meaningful change is to fully understand the needs, wants and desires of those for

193   whom the change is intended". Focusing on the understandings of participants can

194   provide a way to develop adjusted approaches (Meir & Fletcher, 2017). Although some

195   research has focused on the perspectives of participants (f.e. Dukic et al., 2017; Meir &

196   Fletcher, 2017; Nadeau et al., 2016), with the exception of Meir and Fletcher's work

197   (2017), little research is conducted on the socio-cultural potential of community sport.

198   By reporting on the results of an empirical study in Flanders, we aim to meet this

199   research gap.

200   **Methodology**

201   *The Flemish context*

202   Within Flemish sport policy, sport is believed to be a powerful tool for social cohesion:

203   "the Flemish Government recognises that sport (1) fulfils an important role in society by

204   contributing to fitness and health, general well-being and social cohesion and (2) the

205   inclusion of groups in vulnerable situations" (Flemish Government, 2014, p. 12, own

206   translation). However, the traditional sport sector has not played a significant role in the

207   establishment of sport opportunities for socially vulnerable young people. Instead, new

208   initiatives such as community sport have stepped up to do so (Haudenhuyse et al.,

209   2014). The organisation of community sport is implemented in the sport-for-all decree

210   of 2008 as a strategy to combat social stratification in sport participation (Haudenhuyse

211   & Theeboom, 2015). This decree provided a compelling financial boost for community

212   sports, as it is prescribed that 20% of all local sport policy grants should contribute to

213   alternatively organised sports. In Flanders, this policy has been promoted for the past

214   forty years, making Flanders "one of the pioneers in implementing the first European

215   Sport-for-all Charter" (Theeboom, Haudenhuyse, & De Knop, 2010, p. 1393). Although

216   an overall definition or policy vision of community sport is also missing in Flanders,

217   community sport programs are often the result of collaborations between organisations

218   in the sport, youth and social welfare sector. They are subsidised by local governments,

219   leading to large differences between initiatives in terms of organisational identity and

220   structure, networks of partners, target group and accommodation (Haudenhuyse &

221   Theeboom, 2015). Furthermore, they are mostly directed towards the social inclusion of

222   disadvantaged groups, in particular vulnerable young people (Haudenhuyse et al.,

223   2018). Community sports nowadays have proven to be the most frequently used

224   approach when it comes to alternatively organised sports, as 22% of Flemish

225   municipalities provide community sport (Vlaams Instituut voor Sportbeheer en

226   Recreatiebeleid [ISB] & Van Poppel, 2015; Theeboom et al., 2010).

227   The Flemish case of community sport has a rich history of dealing with issues

228   such as ethno-cultural segregation. After the First and Second World War, Belgium

229   recruited guest workers from Italy and Poland to work in the mines and heavy industry

230   sector. However, in the late 1980s, most of the mines were closed, leading to

231   unemployment, distressing circumstances and riots in the early 1990s. As an answer to

232   this, community sport focused on the children of the unemployed miners in order to

233   stimulate their integration and prevent nuisance (Haudenhuyse et al. 2018). This focus

234   on ethno-cultural integration has known a revival since the refugee crisis, which started

235   in 2015. From 2000 to 2016, the number of refugees in Belgium has doubled. However,

236   not only this number has increased, the intern ethnic and cultural diversity within these

237   groups has increased as well (Flemish Government, 2018). Since the refugee crisis, the

238   Flemish government has refocused its attention on providing physical and sport

239   activities, amongst others, in the form of community sport activities. The activities of

240   community sport are intended to provide a form of meaningful leisure time and the

241   empowerment and personal development (especially directed towards education and

242   employment) of refugee youth (Flemish Government, 2016).

243   ***Three cases in Flanders***

244   This study took place in three initiatives in Flanders, in the cities of Bruges, Kortrijk

245   and Ronse. Each of these cities has one central umbrella organisation which coordinates

246   community sport, as activities are often divided and grouped depending on the selected

247   neighbourhood and, therefore, are executed by several different teams within the bigger

248   organisation. In Bruges, community sport intervenes in four neighbourhoods under the

249   supervision of the Public Centre for Social Welfare, which is the main public municipal

250   institution in Belgium that coordinates social services. In Kortrijk, community sport

251   operates in four neighbourhoods through the non-profit organisation AJKO (Active

252   Youth in Kortrijk), situated in the youth and welfare sector. In Ronse, community sport

253   is organised by the local authorities in three vulnerable neighbourhoods. With regard to

254   the ethnic and cultural diversity, these three cities each have high numbers of residents

255   from foreign origins (nationality at birth): 12% in Bruges from 138 different

256   nationalities, 18% in Kortrijk from 127 different nationalities and 30% in Ronse from

257   81 different nationalities (Statistics Flanders, 2018). Community sport organisations

258   predominantly use poverty rates (based on demography, accommodation, education and

259   employment) to select the neighbourhoods in which they intervene. The

260   neighbourhoods in which the three community sport organisations intervene are

261   characterised by high numbers of single-parent families, children in special need

262   education, unstable accommodation and low employability (Province of West Flanders,

263   2014).

264   *Data collection*

265   The selection of the community sport initiatives in Flanders was based on (1) the

266   approach (mission, vision and goal setting) and the organisation of activities, as these

267   should specifically relate to social cohesion as an objective; and (2) the factors that

268   influenced the organisations' selection of the neighbourhood, such as the size of the

269   city, the size of the setting, organisational structure, geographical spread, and target

270   group.

271   To give insight into the complex and socially constructed reality of the young

272   people we interviewed, an interpretative research approach was used (f.e. Crabbe 2007;

273   Kelly, 2011). In that vein, 28 semi-structured interviews were conducted with

274   participants across the organisations in Bruges, Kortrijk, and Ronse. Purposeful

275   sampling was used to maximise the richness of the data (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree,

276   2006). The participants were selected, in close deliberation with the practitioners, based

277 on their age (between 10 and 30 years old) and their years of experience in the

278 organisation (focusing on a suitable balance between participants with longstanding

279 experience and participants with recent experience in the organisation of community

280 sport). Of the 28 participants, 17 were male and 11 were female. Twenty-one

281 respondents were aged between ten and 20. Seven respondents were aged between 21

282 and 30. Thirteen respondents were second-generation migrants (of whom five were

283 from Morocco, two from Somalia, two from Syria, two from France, one from Congo

284 and one from Turkey). Of the 28 respondents, seven had been participating in

285 community sport for less than a year, 16 had been participating for between one and

286 five years, three had been participating for longer than five years, and the duration of

287 participation of two respondents was unknown.

288   The interviews were semi-structured (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006) around

289 three main topics: (1) the background of the participant, (2) the general involvement of

290 the participant in the practice of community sport, and (3) the specific experiences of

291 the participant with regard to the socio-cultural cohesiveness that emerged through the

292 practice of community sport. With regard to the first topic, we used picture prompts in

293 order to obtain some background information on the participants gender, age,

294 nationality/ethnicity, education, family life and accommodation. For the second topic,

295 the method of sentence completion was used to get a general view on participants'

296 participation in and relationship with community sport, in particular: (1) the objectives

297 of participants in participating in community sport, (2) the duration of their

298 participation, (3) their first acquaintance with community sport, (4) an overview of the

299 activities when attending community sport, and (5) the amount of time spent on

300 community sport relative to the overall leisure time of participants. In the last topic,

301 semi-structured questions were included regarding the encounters of participants with

302   others through community sport (f.e. 'have you encountered new people through your

303   participation in community sport?'; 'do you only encounter these people in the context

304   of community sport?'; 'do you think you could have met these people without

305   participating in community sport?'; and 'in what way can the people you've met

306   through community sport be compared with other friends?'). In order to enrich the

307   obtained information, the researcher consistently used follow-up questions. All

308   interviews were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim.

309   *Data analysis*

310   A conventional data analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) was applied. The conventional

311   content analysis approach is highly suitable for capturing the complexity of data. The

312   inductive character of the analysis suggests that the researcher allows the categories to

313   emerge from the data rather than using preconceived categories. Using a coding tree, the

314   data were sorted into categories. Thereafter, the researcher reviewed the categories for

315   overlap and searched for relationships between categories (Westbrook, 1994). In this

316   way clusters of categories or themes (Westbrook, 1994) were derived from the data. The

317   computer software program NVivo was used to aid the analysis.

318   All interviewees were informed of the research and signed the informed consent

319   document. The ethics commission of the Faculty formally approved this study. In the

320   next section of the article, we present the findings of this analysis.

321   **Findings**

322   Four themes recurred throughout the transcripts: (1) Constructing common ground,

323   exceeding common goals, (2) Unconditionality and attachment, how opposites attract,

324   (3) The other, between division and diversity and (4) Building community ties,

325   exception rather than rule. Each is discussed in the findings, with quotations from the

326   interviews (I) to illustrate them.

327   ***Constructing common ground, exceeding common goals***

328   During the interviews, the respondents gave us insight into the extent and the way in

329   which they engaged with other participants during the activities of community sport.

330   They stressed that their participation in community sport was, in the first place,

331   motivated by wanting to get to know other participants. The respondents underlined that

332   they consciously aimed at meeting 'others', identified as participants with completely

333   different backgrounds.

334   A majority of participants pointed towards the "power of sport" (I4) with regard

335   to meeting participants from different backgrounds. In the examples of respondents,

336   sport in itself became a way to overcome the barriers that stemmed from the diversity

337   between participants. The most tangible example was that of the language barrier that

338   participants experienced. One respondent noted:

339   Sometimes the 'others' don't speak Dutch, they speak English or Arabic. But when
340   playing in a team sport, the only thing you have to know are each other's names.
341   You just have to say 'hey', 'pass', 'come here' and 'stand there'. That's it. Nothing
342   more to it. (I14)

343   Sport seemed to provide a way for participants to overcome the first fear of connecting

344   with each other and to acknowledge one another as a fully-fledged part of the team.

345   Having a common goal (Markus & Kirpitchenko, 2007) seemed to be of great

346   importance in this, as it provided a way for respondents to derive the attention away

347   from their individual insecurities and 'otherness'.

348   I'm scared to make mistakes in group. But when everyone is focusing on the ball,
349   no one is looking at me, at my mistakes, at my insecurities. That's why I love
350   sports. (I20)

351 However, respondents furthermore explicated that sport in itself was not sufficient to

352 provide a mutual ground between others to continue or deepen these initial first steps.

353 On the basis of their experiences, respondents drew upon the differences between

354 regular sport and community sport to further explain.

355 I joined a regular basketball club once. However, the language barrier between me
356 and the other team members became problematic. I couldn't communicate with
357 them and thus I felt like a failure again … In community sport, I did come across
358 that same language barrier, but together with the staff and the other players, we
359 were able to transcend that barrier because we all focused on the fact that we are
360 here to do exactly the same thing. (I20)

361 Merely having a common goal through regular sports thus seemed to be insufficient to

362 establish shared values, confirming the limited bridging capital of sport clubs between

363 groups of different social class, or given the example of the language barrier, between

364 youngsters with a migration background and youngsters without a migration

365 background (Spaaij & Westerbeek, 2010; Walseth, 2008). In comparison to regular

366 sport however, community sport seemed to be able to create a common ground between

367 'others', which goes far beyond just setting sport technical goals on a team level.

368 *Unconditionality and attachment, how opposites attract*
369 When reflecting upon the potential of community sport to build a common ground

370 between participants, the respondents particularly stressed the unconditional approach

371 of community sport as very important. To explicate, respondents drew upon the

372 difference between community sport and regular sport (f.e. football, basketball,

373 capoeira, kickboxing and fitness). They argued that unconditionality was experienced in

374 the space and time that was created to encounter others. As such, time was provided for

375 taking breaks, having fun and laughter, free playing and going out. As one respondent

376 mentioned: "sometimes it's just doing fun things with friends and hanging around

377 without having to sport all afternoon" (I6). They argued that, in regular sports, meeting

378 one another only happens on the side of the field, whereas in community sport, it is an

379 integral part of the activity. Making the comparison with regular sport, one respondent

380 argued: "Here, there is more fun, and I can chill and I have more opportunities to have

381 small talks with friends" (I21). Although time and space was provided for respondents

382 to encounter, practitioners warded over the way these encounters came about and

383 steered towards encounters on the basis of mutual understanding. One respondent

384 stated: "in community sport we all need to get along, and if we don't, we get expelled

385 … if there are conflicts during the activities, the coach intervenes and gives us a clear

386 choice, work things out or go home" (I17).

387 Concretely, this mutual understanding refers to the acceptance of participants

388 towards each other, not merely on a sport technical level but more important on a

389 personal level, including the competences, skills, needs and insecurities which derived

390 from participant's backgrounds. Based on that mutual understanding, participants

391 expressed feelings of recognition and acceptance: "Outside of community sport, I

392 always feel pressured to prove myself. Here I don't feel like that at all, it's just about

393 having fun and being together" (I21). In essence, the unconditional approach of

394 community sport provided an environment in which participants felt less judged, which

395 ensured a greater sense of belonging to the group in general. Especially for the

396 respondents who had dropped out of regular sports, these feelings of attachment and

397 belonging were perceived as pivotal.

398   I played in a traditional football club once, but I wasn't accepted there at all. They
399   only gave me five minutes of playtime instead of 25. I took a risk and got out. Then
400   I've got to know community sport. It actually was the only team that I wouldn't
401   have to pay for and moreover that accepted me for the person I am. (I23)

402 These feelings of acceptance made the participation of respondents sustainable: "I was

403 accepted as a person from the beginning, that was pivotal to me, otherwise I would have

404 quit a long time ago" (I17). Respondents found it important that they, as a person,

405 together with their often complex life conditions and the fact that these circumstances

406 might affect their availability to participate, were accepted.

407   I don't always attend community sport, sometimes I do, sometimes I don't. Often, I
408   come home and then I have to take care of my siblings. I really like that fact that
409   community sport is something I can attend when I don't have other things in the
410   way and that they don't judge me for that. (I6)

411 In a sense thus, the unconditional approach of community sport with regard to the

412 participant's life circumstances, made respondents experience higher feelings of

413 belonging and attachment and partially refers to what Markus and Kirpitchenko (2007)

414 call 'socio-cultural cohesiveness'. The experiences of practitioners showed how these

415 seemingly opposite notions, unconditionality and attachment, in the case of community

416 sport, work with each other, rather than against each other.

417 ***The other, between division and diversity***

418 To further explore the reference of participants to the 'other, we asked them about the

419 types of contact they obtained through community sport. Participants especially showed

420 their appreciation towards encounters with others, as it enabled them to accept and

421 respect the backgrounds of participants and to overcome feelings of disparity between

422 them. They truly assigned these interactions to their participation in community sport as

423 these encounters would have never occurred if it were not for community sport.

424 Community sport was described as the only possibility to meet 'others' as little to no

425 connections could be established on other life domains. One respondent argues:

426   Me and Z., we come from completely different social backgrounds. So next to
427   community sport, there isn't any connection between us, through which we could
428   get to know each other or become friends or whatever. (I11)

429   Out of the 28 participants, about half were second-generation migrants from Morocco,

430   Somalia, Syria, France and Congo and half did not have any migrant background,

431   making the group of respondents quite diverse with regard to their cultural and/or ethnic

432   background. The above standing examples of the language barriers between participants

433   particularly pointed at the differences between participants along the line of ethno-

434   cultural affiliations (Donnelly & Coakley, 2002). Notwithstanding literature that

435   describes the importance of cross-cultural interactions for groups with migrant

436   backgrounds (Mata-Codesal, Tiesler, & Peperkamp, 2015; Spracklen et al., 2014), our

437   findings show that the interaction with 'others' within community sport is experienced

438   as much broader than just "cross-cultural interactions" (Denham, 2001, p. 21).

439   First, our findings show no distinctive differences between the experiences of

440   participants with or without a minority background with regard to the importance of

441   these encounters with 'others'. 'Being different' in their experience did not only imply a

442   merely cultural and/or ethnic diversity, but also referred to gender, socio-economic

443   background, school level and mental health (f.e. anxiety disorder, autism spectrum

444   disorder, ADHD etc.). As such, respondents did not so much recognise the so-called

445   division between migrant and non-migrant groups and the segregation of minority

446   groups on the basis of ethno-cultural affiliations, as discussed in literature (Donnelly &

447   Coakley, 2002) but rather described diversity as a much broader, wider and therefore

448   less culturalised phenomenon. Diversity was recognised on a spectrum of characteristics

449   and circumstances and the intersection of those elements. Without making this very

450   specific, Meir and Fletcher (2017) plea that working towards greater social justice

451   through sport development should imply that diversity can be embraced without

452 reinforcing division. As experienced by the participants of community sport, the notion

453 of 'others' is described from a standpoint of diversity, rather than a distinction between

454 participants with migrant and non-migrant backgrounds.

455 ***Building community ties, exception rather than rule***

456 The experiences of participants attest of the partial socio-cultural cohesiveness (Markus

457 & Kirpitchenko, 2007), established through community sport. Partially, as the findings

458 only shed light upon the connections between participants within the specific context of

459 community sport. Literature however points at the uniqueness of community sport in

460 obtaining a sense of community on a local level by the enhancement of community ties

461 on a broader community level (Kelly, 2010; Meir & Fletcher, 2007; Spaaij, 2013). To

462 look at the ability of community sport to do so, we looked into the transferability of

463 connections that were established within community sport towards other contexts.

464   Surprisingly, participants did refer to double connections (between themselves

465 and other participant) in contexts apart from that of community sport (f.e. leisure

466 activities and school). However, a majority of the connections in those contexts were

467 formed prior to the respondent's participation in community sport. Thus, one connection

468 followed the other but most of them were transferred from these other contexts to

469 community sport and not vice versa. One respondent argued: "the people I get along

470 with in community sport, I already knew them, because we are all in the same class"

471 (I5). Participating in community sport however did make it possible for participants to

472 intensify the initial connections that were gained in other contexts. One respondent

473 stated: "my friend, who's in the same class as me, since we both joined community

474 sport, I have a much better connection with him" (I4).

475   Thus, the respondents expressed that transferring connections from community

476 sport to other contexts remained limited. One respondent argued: "doing things outside

477   community sport, that's something I do with my buddies. I would never do such things

478   with these guys from here [in community sport]" (I21). Furthermore, particularly

479   connections between participants from different backgrounds (in its widest form),

480   tended to stay limited to the context of community sport.

481   And if our paths would cross outside of community sport, I would probably just
482   salute, say hi, but I would never start a conversation. Therefore, community sport is
483   truly the linkage between us. (I11)

484   From the interviews with participants, we retrieved one example of a connection in

485   community sport that led to a much broader connection. Furthermore, the respondent

486   stated that community sport gave her the chance to expand her social commitment to

487   other participants and to other life domains: "I think this is important, in sport, in work

488   and in life in general" (I14).

489   In the places where I used to play regular football, only Belgians played. Here, in
490   community sport, there are many people from diverse ethnical backgrounds.
491   Therefore, starting in community sport, I was somewhat scared. I have never
492   encountered with these people in my own neighbourhood, my block or street, as I
493   never met them. However, getting to know them in community sport, made me
494   notice them in other settings, even in my own neighbourhood. Before I joined
495   community sport, I would tend to just ignore them and walk on if they would talk
496   to me. That is probably why I have never noticed them in my own neighbourhood
497   before. Now, I connect with entire families with diverse ethnical backgrounds in
498   my street. (I14)

499   Notwithstanding this hopeful example, constructing a form of recognition between

500   residents that live in the same street through community sport is, although very

501   valuable, far from the so-called establishment of community ties (Kelly, 2010).

502   Furthermore, this example seemed to be an exception, rather than a currently occurring

503   phenomenon.

Discussion and conclusion

Throughout Western European societies, leisure in general and sport activities in particular have been ascribed the potential to create social cohesion and to alleviate cultural segregation (f.e. Burdsey, 2008; Meir & Fletcher, 2017; Spracklen, Long & Hylton, 2014; Velija, Ratna, & Flintoff, 2012). Community sport in particular has been installed as an attempt to offer socially vulnerable young people chances for sport participation, as regular sports proofed to be inadequate to include these young people into their activities (Burdsey, 2008; Donnelly & Coakley, 2002; Haudenhuyse et al., 2018; Spracklen et al., 2014). By stimulating processes of trust, cultural learning and shared identities (Haudenhuyse, Theeboom & Skille, 2014; Meir and Fletcher, 2017), community sport attained to answer to this so-called potential of leisure practices to establish social cohesion (Kelly, 2010; Haudenhuyse et al., 2014; Meir & Fletcher, 2017; Misener & Doherty, 2009; Spaaij, 2013). As such, the notion of community, as given form within the logic of community sport in particular and alternative leisure practices in general, is one of creating shared cultural values, goals and visions. The research, which lies at the basis of this article, has focused on the voices and experiences of participants in relation to socio-cultural cohesiveness in community sport. The findings show us that there is a need to challenge both the logic from which these alternative practices have been introduced and the concept of community as given form within this logic.

First, (community) sport literature often draws upon the notion of social cohesion as an ethno-cultural building block of community, which we referred to as socio-cultural cohesiveness (Markus & Kirpitchenko, 2007). However, our findings reveal that, from the perspectives of participants, diversity does not merely relate to ethno-cultural background but is also understood in terms of gender, socio-economic background, school level and mental health. Second, the stories of the participants

530 seemed to be build up around one common thread, namely, their present and/or previous

531 (often failed or low) participation in regular sports and their feelings of failure,

532 disappointment and anger as a result of this. As such, our findings challenge the rather

533 limited view of research on leisure as a practice that should particularly focus on

534 stimulating socio-cultural cohesiveness. Rather than referring to a dominantly socio-

535 cultural dimension of social cohesion, the voices of participants shed light upon the

536 (lack of) social involvement of participants within regular sports. These findings seem

537 to suggest that limiting the notion of community to mere socio-cultural cohesion might

538 reinforce an instrumental approach (Mata-Codesal, Tiesler and Peperkamp, 2015).

539 Herein, emphasis is put on installing cultural collectiveness and adapting participants to

540 these collective values, yet, without paying attention to the unequal participation of

541 socially vulnerable young people in regular sports. In other words, focusing on mere

542 socio-cultural cohesion, might result in ignoring the political and economic dimension

543 of social cohesion, in terms of social and political participation in society and the

544 distribution of goods, services and conditions (Markus & Kirpitchenko, 2007).

545   Furthermore, Burdsey (2008) states that sport in particular contains the danger

546 of working exclusionary when "intra-community cohesion takes precedence over cross-

547 cultural engagement" (Burdsey, 2008, p. 264). However, the installment of alternative

548 leisure practices, such as community sport, from the dominant objective to establish

549 socio-cultural cohesiveness, might exactly facilitate this intra-community cohesion as it

550 allows the conservation of a divided community, comprised of 'regular leisure' and

551 'alternative leisure'. This implies that striving towards mere socio-cultural cohesion

552 within separate circuits, without problematizing this division in itself and the underlying

553 exclusion of vulnerable young people from regular leisure creates the risk of looking at

554 these alternative practices with pink glasses under the guise of cultural collectiveness, as

555 well as overlooking the political and economic immurement of participants within these

556 practices.

557   As a counterproposal, we argue to revisit the concepts of social cohesion and

558 community. First, we urge for revisiting social cohesion towards a broadened

559 interpretation that exceeds mere ethno-cultural dimensions, acknowledges and acts upon

560 political and economic diversity between participants. Furthermore, we urge that the

561 concept of community should be understood from the intersectional relationship

562 between socio-cultural, political and economic dimensions of social cohesion.

563 Broadening the concepts of cohesion and community might help us to move away from

564 a conservative communitarian perspective in which community means creating cultural

565 collectiveness, yet, within divided and unequal realities.

566   The contribution of this article lies in the way in which we have taken empirical

567 data on the voices of participants in the case of community sport and have looked upon

568 this as an exemplary case of the broader field of alternative leisure. As such, we hope

569 that our research might provide new insights and might instigate leisure research, policy

570 and practice, not so much to purge the field of leisure from alternative practices, but

571 rather to recognize this division and to continuously alleviate inequality between

572 participants, not only within, but far more across the fields of regular and alternative

573 leisure and to strive towards social cohesion in the broadest sense possible.

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