Policymakers, practitioners and researchers from different policy areas, especially within the youth and welfare sector, agree on the ‘social potential’ of community sport practices. Starting from the main rationales ‘sport for all’ and ‘sport as a social tool’, these community sport practices and the social benefits that are believed to emanate from them are considered particularly crucial in the development of socially deprived youth, as they are less likely to participate in regular, structured leisure time activities.

Despite this consensus on the ‘social potential’ of community sport practices, we argue that research on this, seemingly, homogenous concept has manifested itself on two axes. First, sport is perceived as an attractive tool that (might) contribute to the social development of the individual (learning communication skills, learning to cope with competition). Second, community sports (can) enhance the social development of communities. In relation to the latter, social cohesion is operationalized as a key indicator of community development.

My research project is initiated from the observation that in both axes, research is dominantly focused on indicators and outcomes of community sport practices on an individual level, even when researching the meaning of social cohesion. As a consequence, little is yet known about the relationship between community sports and social cohesion on the community level.

Although we believe that conceptualizations on the relationship between community sport practices and social cohesion on an individual level as well as on the community level are intertwined, we wish to criticize the dominant discourses wherein research is conducted dominantly from an individual perspective. More specific, we argue that these research approaches contain risks of stigmatization, labeling socially vulnerable youngsters as ‘the anti-social other’. Furthermore, we believe that these approaches (could) lead to the culpabilization of these youngsters, blaming them as outcasts and demanding them to adjust to the dominant social order while failing to raise questions on structural causes of inequality that are imbedded in educational, social and political systems.

Current research has, in our opinion, not yet, been able to grasp the meaning of community sport on a community level. The aim of this research thus, is to get a clear notion of the existing conceptualizations on the relationship(s) between community sport and social cohesion (and the meaning of these relationships) in literature, community sport practices and the perspectives of participants. In particular, we aspire to develop a more contextualized understanding of sport-based interventions, through the use of theoretical frameworks of social work and social pedagogy, as we believe they will enable us to go
beyond these ‘individualized’ conceptualizations and to provide a more context-based understanding of these community sport practices.