Community sport and social cohesion: towards a social work perspective

The enhancement of social cohesion has always been a key challenge in social work. To give answer to this, social work is progressively reaching towards (innovative) interventions, that are traditionally not defined as social work practices. In particular, community sport practices are apprised by policymakers, researchers and practitioners across the sport, youth and welfare sector, as they (are believed to) provide a socially inclusive approach towards sports participation. By doing so, community sport practices advocate the achievement of social objectives, such as social cohesion, rather than sport-technical objectives, which is considered to be particularly crucial for the development of socially vulnerable youngsters. Although in state of the art literature, community sport’s contribution towards social cohesion seems evident, we argue that, taking this at face value may be premature, as social cohesion is often identified as a community-based notion at surface, but backslides to individual, psychological measurements, when it is operationalized. Moreover, we problematize this dominant psychologized discourse as it overlooks the complex character of social cohesion, reduces community sport interventions to technical responses to whatever problem and culpabilizes socially vulnerable youngsters without considering structural causes of inequality. In this presentation, we will report on the findings of a qualitative study, which is part of the Flemish Strategic Basic Research Project ‘CATCH’, in which we conducted in depth-interview with community sport practitioners, partners and stakeholders (n=34), in order to get a contextualized understanding of the relationship between community sport interventions and social cohesion.