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Sport for social cohesion: from scoping review to new research directions

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ABSTRACT

There have been growing efforts to harness sport to tackle social issues and promote development. Social cohesion is arguably the most prominent objective of these activities. However, social cohesion remains a contested concept subject to many definitions, and we do not have a clear picture of how social cohesion is defined or supported in sport programmes or organizations. This makes it difficult to identify successful approaches, develop measurements and build theories. To begin addressing these gaps, we have conducted a systematic scoping review, leading to an analysis of 35 studies exploring sport for social cohesion. Overall, we find that the literature fails to consistently define social cohesion, though it tends to coalesce around a set of core dimensions. Likewise, programme elements are inconsistently reported. Moving forward, we call on researchers to clearly define social cohesion and explore its sub-dimensions in more depth, which, in turn, can foster greater theoretical development.

KEYWORDS

Social cohesion; sport; sport for development; scoping review; systematic review

Over the last two decades, there have been growing efforts to harness sport to tackle social issues and promote development (Coalter 2008, Giulianotti et al. 2019). Due to its broad appeal, relatively low cost, and interactive nature, sport has been presented as a vehicle to support developmental objectives such as increased employability (Coalter, Theeboom, and Truyens 2020), health promotion (Hansell, Giacobbi, and Voelker 2021) or education (Moustakas 2020). Social cohesion is arguably the most prominent objective of these sport for development (SFD) activities. Around ten per cent of SFD organizations featured in a global mapping exercise highlight social cohesion as their primary objective (Svensson and Woods 2017), though many more sport organizations within and beyond the SFD movement prioritize this objective (see, e.g. Moustakas et al. 2021). Indeed, in terms of research in the SFD field, social cohesion is the most prominently addressed thematic area (Schulenkorf, Sherry, and Rowe 2016). Likewise, the links between sport and social cohesion have been recognized by both international governmental organizations (Council of Europe 2001, UNESCO 2017, Council of the European Union 2020) and development agencies (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ)) 2018).

Despite this significant activity, social cohesion remains a contested concept subject to numerous definitions (Fonseca, Lukosch, and Brazier 2019) and measurements (Bruhn 2009). In other fields, the concept is subject to both narrow and broad definitions, turning

it into a malleable quasi-concept that can morph to support any given set of developmental or political priorities (Bernard 2002, Schiefer and van der Noll 2017). This leads to many important gaps in the area of sport for social cohesion. Without an adequate understanding of the definition of social cohesion in sport programmes or organizations, it is impossible to effectively understand, measure and evaluate if these programmes support social cohesion. Relatedly, we still know very little about how, in general, social cohesion is supported through these programmes. Programme information, including activities, duration, and frequency, continues to be under-reported (Coalter 2017, Svensson and Woods 2017). In combination, these gaps impeded efforts to identify successful (or unsuccessful) approaches, develop consistent measurements and, eventually, build theories around sport for social cohesion.

Thus, this paper responds to calls to better articulate ‘the nature of the social change being discussed’ (Misener, Rich, and Pearson 2022, p. 13) and aims to map out the aspects of programmes that aim to achieve those goals (Coalter 2017). In particular, we wish to map out what is known about the definition, delivery and outcomes of sport for social cohesion programmes and chart a future research agenda for this area. To do so, we have conducted a systematic scoping review on sport for social cohesion. Through this, we aim to understand how social cohesion is defined within the sporting sphere and, when possible, document the programme mechanisms used to support social cohesion through sport.

Moving forward, our paper progresses in four steps. First, we will present the theoretical and political underpinnings of social cohesion. After, we will outline the methodology associated with our scoping review, including the main research questions and inclusion criteria. Then, we will present our findings in line with the research questions. Finally, we will conclude by discussing these findings and charting a course for further research on sport for social cohesion.

Background of social cohesion

Starting with Emile Durkheim’s works in the late 19th century, social cohesion has developed an extensive intellectual heritage (Bruhn 2009, Spaaij et al. 2013, Fonseca, Lukosch, and Brazier 2019). Despite this considerable history, the term remains contested, and its associated body of literature is rich and complex (Moustakas 2021, 2022a). However, generally speaking, discussions around social cohesion have occurred either at the policy or theoretical levels (cf. Raw, Sherry, and Rowe 2022).

At the policy level, contemporary discussions of social cohesion began in earnest in the 1990s, with numerous governments and civil society actors extensively engaging with the term in the late 20th and early 21st centuries (Dobbernack 2014). Of note, Canadian authors such as Jenson (1998) or Helly (2002) played prominent roles in those early debates. Namely, Jenson’s work is considered a cornerstone for many modern social cohesion policies. She defined socially cohesive societies along five core dimensions: societies where groups feel a sense of inclusion, belonging, recognition, participation and legitimacy (Jenson 1998). Though there is still no consistent definition of social cohesion at the policy level (Hulse and Stone 2007), many current policies reflect some or all of the dimensions elaborated by Jenson (e.g. Council of Europe 2010, OECD 2011). For instance, the Council of Europe (2010) defines social cohesion ‘as the capacity of a society to ensure the well-being of all its members – minimizing disparities and avoiding marginalization – to manage differences

and divisions and ensure the means of achieving welfare for all members'. These policies, however, have come under extensive criticism for dismissing the state's role in social cohesion and, instead, placing the responsibility for greater social cohesion on individuals already facing various social challenges (Helly 2002, Moustakas et al. 2021).

At the theoretical level, disciplinary boundaries heavily influence the definition or operationalization of social cohesion (Moustakas 2022a), whereby researchers conceptualize social cohesion 'based on the theoretical assumptions of their own discipline' (Bruhn 2009, p. 31). For example, psychology focuses on interactions within and between small groups (Bruhn 2009), whereas in anthropology, the role of cultural practices and rituals is often emphasized (Taylor and Davis 2018). The contributions across these different disciplines provide valuable insights but also confound the meaning of social cohesion. Indeed, as this body of research has grown, several related dimensions, behaviours or measures have been added to definitions of social cohesion, including dimensions that may be better characterized as antecedents or consequences of social cohesion (Friedkin 2004, Chan, To, and Chan 2006, Moustakas 2022a). Furthermore, many existing measures and experimental studies focus predominantly on pre-defined groups in specific situations and do not necessarily investigate how involvement in a particular setting translates to greater social cohesion outside of that setting (cf. Bruhn 2009).

Recognising this growing and multidisciplinary body of research (Moustakas 2022a), numerous attempts to summarize or reconceptualize the term have appeared over the last 15 years. In doing so, authors have generally adopted either a broader or narrower view of the concept. On the one hand, authors such as Fonseca, Lukosch, and Brazier (2019) take a broad view of social cohesion. Reviewing academic and policy work on the subject, the authors put forth a multi-level view of social cohesion that incorporates ideas of well-being, belonging, social participation, tolerance, and equal opportunities. Thus, all elements that can represent or lead to social cohesion are combined and mapped onto a framework applying to the individual, community and institutional levels.

On the other hand, authors such as Schiefer and van der Noll (2017) or Chan, To, and Chan (2006) support a narrower conception of social cohesion. In this view, social cohesion is generally reduced to three core aspects: a sense of belonging, social relations and an orientation towards the common good. Most prominently, Chan, To, and Chan (2006) supported this narrower perspective, arguing that broader conceptualisations conflate the central elements of social cohesion with elements that may support or restrict social cohesion. Following this logic, they suggest that social cohesion is a state 'characterized by a set of attitudes and norms that includes trust, a sense of belonging and the willingness to participate and help, as well as their behavioural manifestations' (Chan, To, and Chan 2006). Building on this, in a more recent review, Schiefer and van der Noll (2017) theorize that equality is a precursor to social cohesion and that higher social cohesion leads to higher levels of well-being.

Despite their position, Schiefer and van der Noll (2017) recognize the existence of a wide range of definitions and map out six dimensions (see Table 1) commonly associated with social cohesion: social relations, sense of identification, orientation towards the common good, shared values, equality, and quality of life. These dimensions provide a useful baseline to outline how social cohesion is understood across contexts and will likewise serve as a theoretical basis for part of the analysis in this review. More precisely, social relations speak to the quality, tolerance, and trust within different social networks. Sense of identification

Table 1. Common dimensions of social cohesion (adapted from Schiefer and van der Noll 2017).

Dimensions	Description	Sub-dimensions
Social Relations	Quality and strength of relations between groups and individuals	Social networks; participation; trust; mutual tolerance
Sense of Identification	Feelings of attachment and belonging to a social entity	N/A
Orientation towards the common good	Feelings of responsibility for the common good and compliance to social order.	Feelings of responsibility; acceptance and compliance to social order; civic participation
Shared values	Shared, commonly held values across societal groups	Value consensus; preference for values that enhance cohesion
(In)Equality	Level of equality in distribution of social and economic resources	Distribution of resources; diversity; social exclusion
Quality of Life	Objective and subjective levels of quality of life.	Psycho-social wellbeing; physical health; living conditions

refers to feelings of attachment or identities towards a social entity such as a sports club, a city or a country. Orientation towards the common good includes feelings of responsibility towards others and acceptance of the social order. Shared values refer to consensus around lifestyles, values and beliefs. Equality speaks to the distribution and access to societal resources, such as education, employment or social support. Finally, quality of life includes subjective and objective measures of well-being, including health and living conditions (Schiefer and van der Noll 2017).

Arguably, the definitional flexibility associated with social cohesion can offer researchers, implementers or policymakers the chance to shape social cohesion in a way that aligns with their priorities or biases (Bernard 2002, Raw, Sherry, and Rowe 2022). In turn, this increases the risk that programmes reproduce the dominant, neo-liberal power structures embedded in current social cohesion policies (Helly 2002, Moustakas et al. 2021). However, even though it is one of the core thematic areas in SFD research (Schulenkorf, Sherry, and Rowe 2016), how the concept is understood within the field of sport remains unclear. Furthermore, other authors have found little consistent documentation of how programmes are designed. Programme elements, including sport and non-sporting activities, duration of participation, and frequency of participation remain under-reported (Coalter 2017, Svensson and Woods 2017). This means that, regarding sport for social cohesion, we neither have a clear definition of what is being achieved nor *how*. Yet, without a clear picture of these elements, we cannot effectively extract good practices, promote further theoretical development and put forth a responsive research agenda. Thus, through a systematic scoping review, we wish to address these issues and provide a thorough status quo on the literature on sport for social cohesion. In turn, doing so will allow us to articulate the key findings and gaps in the literature and propose new potential research directions in this area.

Methods

Scoping reviews are a way of synthesizing knowledge in emergent and complex areas. In particular, scoping reviews can be appropriate to identify evidence in a given field, clarify concepts and identify gaps (Munn et al. 2018). In the field of sport, there have been calls for scholars to adopt scoping reviews as a more structured approach to research synthesis (Dowling et al. 2020). And, in recent years, this approach has been used concerning various

topics such as sexual violence in sport (Gaedicke et al. 2021) or sport and peacebuilding (Clarke, Jones, and Smith 2021).

For the following, we adopt the methodological approach outlined by Arksey and O'Malley (2005), which is the most commonly used framework and has been adopted by the reviews above. Overall, our scoping review began in March 2021 and took approximately seven months to complete. The review followed six steps, namely: (1) identifying the research questions; (2) identifying relevant studies; (3) study selection; (4) charting the data; (5) collating, summarizing and reporting the results. A sixth step, consultation with fellow academics and sport for social cohesion practitioners, was also implemented to add rigour and validate findings. A scoping review protocol was developed and registered to the Open Science Framework (OSF) (see Moustakas 2022b). As is typical with scoping reviews, some aspects of our protocol were refined and developed iteratively (Dowling et al. 2020). These changes were also noted and subsequently uploaded to the related OSF folder.

Identification of the research questions

According to Arksey and O'Malley (2005), research questions should guide the search strategy. They should not be so narrow as to limit the analytical process and be broad enough to identify all relevant literature. As such, in line with the aims of our study, we developed five research questions to structure our work: (1) How is social cohesion defined in the context of sports or sport programmes? (2) What programme elements are present in sport for social cohesion programmes (e.g. activities, delivery frequency)? (3) Who are the target groups of these programmes?; (4) How do studies measure social cohesion, and what are their findings?; and (5) what gaps and future research directions exist in the area of sport and social cohesion?

Determination of relevant studies

A comprehensive search strategy was developed and reviewed by the authors and a group of critical friends. Numerous multidisciplinary and thematically relevant databases were selected, and numerous search combinations were piloted. A final search string was chosen (('sport*' OR 'physical activity') AND ('social cohesion' OR 'social inclusion')) that balances the breadth and relevance of results as well as overall feasibility. In particular, given the often interchangeable use of the terms 'inclusion' and 'cohesion' in policy and research, both terms were included to ensure a breadth of results were captured. Likewise, sport and physical activity were used as search terms in line with the broad definitions of sport in international literature and policy (e.g. UNESCO 2017). Various databases, including Web of Science, Scopus and SportDiscus, were used to generate results. Searches were limited to peer-reviewed journal publications and theses/dissertations published in English between 1990 and 2020. Tables 2 and 3 present the search strategy and inclusion criteria, respectively.

Study selection

Covidence software was used to manage and streamline the process of abstract and full-text screening. Both authors reviewed each abstract and subsequent full-text, and a unanimous

Table 2. Overview of search terms and databases.

Search terms	('sport*' OR 'physical activity') AND ('social cohesion' OR 'social inclusion')
Search area	Title, Abstract, Key Word
Databases	<p>Web of Science</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Web of Science Core Collection • KCI-Korean Journal Database • MEDLINE • Russian Science Citation Index • Scielo Citation Index <p>Scopus</p> <p>Ebsco Discovery Service</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PsylINDEX • SportDISCUS • Sociology Source Ultimate <p>CABI Leisure Tourism</p>

Table 3. Summary of inclusion/exclusion criteria.

	Inclusion	Exclusion
Topic	Texts concerning the influence of active sport participation (either in general or in a sport programme/project) on social cohesion	Texts concerning group or team cohesion. Text concerning passive forms of participation, such as media consumption, fandom or event viewing. Texts concerning managerial practices or policy in sport.
Population/Target group	Target groups of all ages and backgrounds	None.
Design/Form	Empirical studies using quantitative and/or qualitative methods Conceptual or theoretical papers Position papers or editorials	Meta-analyses Systematic Reviews
Publication type	Peer-reviewed journal articles Theses/Dissertations	Monographs Books Grey Literature
Language	English	Documents not in English
Geographic scope	Worldwide	None
Timeframe	1990–2020	Documents outside of defined range.

decision was required for texts to progress to full-text screening and, later, to full-text inclusion. Full-text inclusion occurred when the influence of active participation in sport (i.e. participation in general or a specific activity/programme) on social cohesion was mentioned or explored in-depth through the results or discussion. The mere mention of social cohesion as part of a broader literature review was not sufficient for inclusion.

Texts discussing passive forms of sport participation, such as fandom, event attendance, or media consumption, were excluded, as were texts focusing on policy or management practices related to sport. Finally, articles and dissertations exploring concepts of 'group' or 'team' cohesion were excluded. Though group cohesion shares many similarities with social cohesion, it has two main differences. One, the unit of analysis is restricted to a single group where the participants are inherently familiar with each other. Two, group cohesion tends to focus on the nature and outcomes of narrow, pre-defined tasks (for a review, see Pescosolido and Saavedra 2012) (Figure 1).

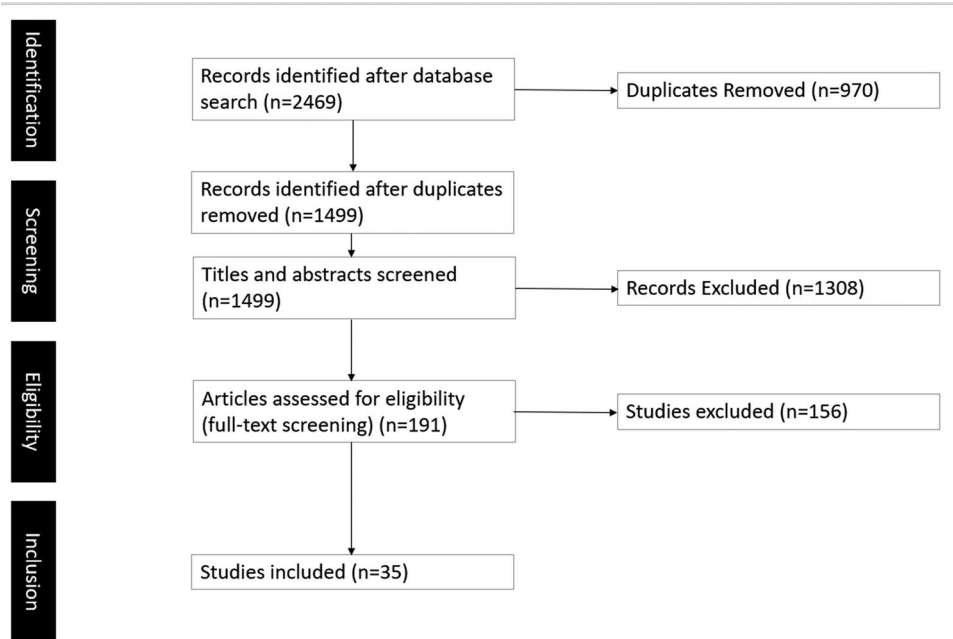


Figure 1. PRISMA flow chart.

Charting the data

The next stage of the process involved charting, and data extraction from the included studies. We carried out this process using Excel and, when available, collected bibliographic, methodological, programmatic and definitional information for all included studies. In terms of bibliographic and methodological information, we collected: author(s), author affiliation locations; year; journal; country of study; type of study; length/period of study; methodology; sample size, and theory employed. If the text featured a specific programme, we also collected: target group descriptions; the context of the programme; sports activities used; non-sport activities used; length and frequency of intervention; and setting (community/recreational, school, sport club, other). Finally, we identified the definition of social cohesion used in the text.

Additionally, we coded the social cohesion dimensions embedded in the text as per the six dimensions of social cohesion from Schiefer and van der Noll (2017). In particular, we coded for a specific dimension when it was connected to the author's understanding of social cohesion, be it through the definition, measures, results or discussion. In addition, to account for different levels of attention given to the topic, we coded publications into two groups, those that focus on social cohesion throughout the text (i.e. referring to the concept throughout the literature review, results and discussion) and those that merely mention social cohesion as a subset of their results or in the later discussion.

The first and second authors then undertook a pilot charting process that involved data extraction from six randomly selected texts to become familiarized with the process and ensure consistency. Thereafter, charting was conducted by a single author. When an author was uncertain about a particular classification, a discussion was held to generate consensus.

and consistency. Each author also periodically reviewed other extractions to ensure quality and address emerging issues.

Collating and reporting results

Both frequency analysis and deductive coding were used to collate and report the results. The variables extracted for the frequency analysis included: publication year, data origin (country), journal, methodology, study population, and sport. As discussed above, the deductive coding allowed us to identify the social cohesion dimensions in the texts. Based on the results of this coding, we then conducted a frequency analysis to document the occurrence of each dimension and the co-occurrence of dimensions.

Consultation

Though consultation is presented here as the final step, consultation took place at the beginning and concluding phases of this research. Two academics not involved in the study reviewed and commented on the proposed search strategy and inclusion criteria. Following the collation and writing of the results, another two academic colleagues reviewed the extracted data and provided a critical appraisal of our overall analysis.

Findings

General study characteristics

In total, we identified 35 articles that examined the topic of sport for social cohesion based on the definitions and inclusion criteria presented above.

Publication year

Though our search parameters extended back to 1990, there are no included texts before 2001. Publication frequency has increased since 2008, with 25 out of 35 publications coming after that year. In particular, 2019 ($n = 7$) and 2020 ($n = 8$) feature the most publications.

Journals

The publications appeared in 26 different journals. Three publications each were included in the journals 'Sport in Society', 'Social Inclusion', 'Sport, Education and Society', and a further two were in 'Leisure Studies', 'BMC Health', and the 'International Review for the Sociology of Sport'.

Research locations

Research data comes mostly ($n = 31$) from countries in the so-called West or 'Global North', which can be characterized as Europe, North America, Australia and New Zealand. The other four studies come from Iraq, Colombia, and South Africa ($n = 2$). Some countries appear more frequently than others, including Australia ($n = 7$), England ($n = 5$), Sweden ($n = 4$) and Belgium, as well as the Netherlands ($n = 3$). There are 32 single-country publications and three featuring data from three different countries.

Methodology

The majority of the publications use a qualitative approach ($n = 23$), while the rest use either a quantitative approach ($n = 3$), a mixed-method approach ($n = 5$) or a conceptual/theoretical approach ($n = 4$). The range of qualitative research methods includes open or semi-structured interviews ($n = 22$), focus groups ($n = 10$) and observations ($n = 10$). The quantitative approaches mainly included surveys ($n = 6$), though one study used network analysis. Document-based research ($n = 3$) was also used to support the mixed methods or conceptual/theoretical approaches.

Study population

The studies focus predominantly on young people (under 18) ($n = 11$). Many of these youth have a refugee background ($n = 3$) or a specific religious or ethnic background ($n = 2$). Some papers also focus on adult refugees or newcomers ($n = 4$) or physical education teachers ($n = 6$) and their experience implementing classes or programmes. Furthermore, when the research focuses on a specific programme, the participants and facilitators are often included in the study population ($n = 6$).

Theories

Less than half of the studies employed a specific theory ($n = 14$). Theories on social capital (Bourdieu $n = 2$; Putman $n = 1$; combination $n = 1$) were mentioned most, followed by contact theory ($n = 3$) and Foucault's governmentality approach ($n = 2$). Additionally, individual texts focused on Bourdieu's theory of practice, Bourdieu's theory on habitus and acculturation, critical race theory, reconciliation theories or identity theory.

Definition of social cohesion

Precise definitions of social cohesion are mostly absent in the retained publications. Most texts ($n = 27$) do not explicitly define social cohesion. Furthermore, not all texts engage with social cohesion to the same extent. About half focus on social cohesion throughout ($n = 18$), and another half mention social cohesion in the results or discussion ($n = 17$).

Despite the absence of definitions and varying levels of focus, to further elucidate the concept of social cohesion, we coded the texts according to the different dimensions as per Schiefer and van der Noll (2017; see Table 1). Most notably, 34 of 35 papers included the dimension of social relations. For instance, this was reflected through notions of making new friends (Chalkley et al. 2020), building new relationships between diverse groups (Kelly 2011) or being able to interact with new people. Following this, attachment/belonging was the most frequently mentioned dimension ($n = 22$), which typically referred to a general sense of togetherness with the society, or 'feeling of belonging to the broader community and society' (Johns, Grossman, and McDonald 2014).

The dimensions of shared values ($n = 16$) and orientation towards the common good ($n = 17$) were roughly equally present. For some, this meant values that may promote social cohesion, such as acceptance or tolerance (e.g. Carratalá et al. 2019) or the values that emerge from the 'negotiation and mutual exploration of different and similar values' (Nathan and al, 2010). As for orientation toward the common good, this relates to ideas of mutual support and help and, in the case of these studies, often is reflected through ideas of

volunteering or civic participation (e.g. Johns, Grossman, and McDonald 2014, Van der Veken et al. 2022). Furthermore, both orientation towards the common good and shared values were often mentioned together (n = 10). Finally, quality of life (n = 10) and (in)equality (n = 7) are mentioned the least in connection with social cohesion.

Measurement of social cohesion

Within the sub-set of quantitative or mixed-methods texts, only a handful (n = 4) define measures of social cohesion. Nathan et al. (2013) use survey questions to measure various aspects, including sense of belonging, social relations, prosocial behaviour and emotional well-being. Grimminger-Seidensticker and Möhwald (2020) measure social cohesion by asking students how much they would like to complete certain activities with other classmates. Mousa (2020), looking at Christian-Muslim relations in Northern Iraq, uses questionnaires to measure attitudinal indices and numerous behavioural outcomes (e.g. visiting a Muslim restaurant). Finally, Jaramillo et al. (2021) analyze the networks associated with the Facebook pages of four local sport programmes, looking at the growth in users and friendships associated with the pages (Table 4).

Programme elements

Overall, 17 of the 35 extracted publications looked at a specific programme or intervention. These programmes predominantly feature football (n = 5) or multi-sport (n = 6) activities. Sports such as football (n = 2), ultimate Frisbee (n = 2), fitness, dancing, cricket, surfing, and others are included in the multi-sport programmes. Elsewhere, single-sport programmes used cycling, running, ice hockey or judo.

In terms of non-sporting activities, about half of the publications (n = 9) described such activities. These activities predominantly included various workshops (n = 5, e.g. nutrition workshops, coaching courses, life skills, language courses, bike repair courses) or cultural activities (n = 2).

The length of the interventions was given by around half of the publications (n = 8) and ranged from 3 weeks to 3 years. A small number of publications (n = 4) specified the frequency of the intervention, which varied from weekly to daily.

Target groups

Of the investigated programmes, target groups are mostly centred around school students (n = 5), so-called at-risk or marginalized youth (n = 4), refugees or immigrants (n = 3) and other ethnic groups (n = 2)

Discussion and future research

The selected studies provide a mixed picture of how social cohesion is understood. Most strikingly, despite the growing popularity and relevance of social cohesion in sport, the term itself is seldom clearly defined. Often, an understanding of the term appears to be taken for granted and is, at best, described in only one or two sentences. As Harris and

Table 4. Selected overview of studies and social cohesion dimensions.

Author(s)	Year (First published)	Journal name	Country of study	Methodology	Social cohesion dimensions	Mention/ Focus
Shana Sabbe, Lieve Bradt, Ramon Spaaij, Rudy Roose	2018	Community Development Journal	Belgium	Semi-structured interviews and Group Discussions	Social Relations; Attachment/Belonging; Common good; (In)equality	Focus
Shahzad Mohammadi	2019	Sport in Society	Germany	Participant observations, Life story interviews, follow-up interviews, focus group discussions and organizational documents	Social Relations; Attachment/Belonging; Common Good	Mention
Salma Mousa	2020	Science	Iraq	Field experiment measuring numerous behavioural outcomes (e.g. visit a Muslim restaurant) and attitudinal indices at different stages after the intervention.	Social Relations; Shared Values	Focus
Brandi Fox, Yin Paradies	2019	Race, Ethnicity and Education	Australia	Observational data as well as interviews and focus groups	Social Relations; Attachment/Belonging	Mention
Shana Sabbe, Lieve Bradt, Griet Roets, Rudi Roose	2019	Leisure Studies	Belgium	Semi-structured interviews	Social Relations; Attachment/Belonging; Common Good; Shared Values	Focus
Ana M. Jaramillo, Felipe Montes, Olga L. Sarmiento, Ana Paola Rios, Lisa G. Rosas, Ruth F. Hunter, Ana Lucia Rodriguez, Abby C. King	2020	Network Science	Colombia	Analysis of Facebook friendship networks; Surveys	Social Relations	Focus
Göran Gerdin, Lena Larsson, Katarina Schenker, Susanne Linnér, Kjersti Mordal Moen, Knut Westlie, Wayne Smith, Rod Philpott	2020	International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health	Sweden, Norway, New Zealand	Observations and interviews	Social Relations; Attachment/Belonging; Common Good; Shared Values	Focus
Michael Fehsenfeld	2015	Physical Culture and Sport	Denmark	Focus Group Discussions	Social Relations; Shared Values; Attachment/Belonging	Focus
Elke Grimminger-Seidensticker, Aiko Möhwald	2020	Physical Education and Sport Pedagogy	Germany	Quasi-experimental design with four measurement points	Social Relations; Common Good	Focus
Karen Block, Lisa Gibbs	2017	Social Inclusion	Australia	Qualitative exploratory design with semi-structured interviews	Social Relations; Attachment/Belonging; Quality of Life	Mention

(Continued)

Table 4. continued

Sally Nathan, Lynn Kemp, Anne Bunde-Birouste, Julie MacKenzie, Clifton Evers, Tun Aung Shwe	2013	BMC Public Health	Australia	Mixed-method quasi-experimental design; Quantitative (survey), Qualitative (informal & unstructured interviews)	Social Relations; Attachment/Belonging; Common Good; Quality of Life	Mention
Tom Cockburn	2016	Children & Society	England	Weekly observations across two seasons	Social relations; Attachment/Belonging	Mention
Laura Kelly	2011	Critical Social Policy	England	Interviews and analysis of internal project data	Social Relations; Common Good	Focus
Kristine Höglund, Ralph Sundberg	2008	Third World Quarterly	South Africa	Literature Review and document analysis	Social Relations; (In)equality	Mention
David Meir, Thomas Fletcher	2019	International Review for the Sociology of Sport	England	Participatory Action Research (e.g. group discussions, interviews)	Social Relations; Attachment/Belonging; Common Good; Shared Values; (In)equality	Focus
Teresa Lleixà, Carolina Nieva	2018	Sport, Education and Society	Spain	Interviews and focus groups	Social Relations; Shared Values; (In)equality; Quality of Life	Focus
Amelia Johns, Michele Grossman, Kevin McDonald	2014	Social Inclusion	Australia	Qualitative (semi-structured interviews and focus groups), quantitative (exit surveys)	Social Relations; Attachment/Belonging; Common Good; Shared Values	Mention
Anna E. Chalkley, Ash C. Routen, Jo P. Harris, Lorraine A. Cale, Trish Gorley and Lauren B. Sherar	2020	Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology	England	9 semi-structured focus groups	Social Relations; Quality of Life	Focus
Sally Nathan, Anne Bunde-Birouste, Clifton Evers, Lynn Kemp, Julie MacKenzie, Robert Henley	2010	BMC Public Health	Australia	Proposed methodology includes a quasi-experimental cohort design with treatment partitioning (using a so-called 'dose response' model) using survey instruments, qualitative interviews, participant observation and self-reporting methods (scrapbooks, photos)	Social Relations; Shared Values; Common Good; (In)equality	Focus
Wayne Smith, Rod Philpot, Göran Gerdin, Katarina Schenker, Susanne Linnér, Lena Larsson, Kjersti Mordal Moen, and Knut Westlie	2020	Sport, Education and Society	Sweden, Norway, New Zealand	Observations and interviews	Social Relations; Attachment/Belonging; Common Good	Focus
George Karlis	2015	Leisure and Society	Canada	Case Study	Social Relations; Shared Values	Focus
Mari H. Engh, Cheryl Potgieter	2015	Journal of Conflict Resolution	South Africa	Literature review	Social Relations; Attachment/Belonging; (In)equality	Focus

Table 4. continued

Andre Krouwel, N. Boonstra, Jan Willem Duyvendak, L. Veldboer	2006	International Review for the Sociology of Sport	Netherlands	Use of data from two previous studies, literature review	Social Relations; Attachment/Belonging	Mention
Vincente Carratalá, Adrià Arco-Ahulló, Ignacio Carratalá, Helio Carratalá, Jose-Luis Bermejo	2019	Journal of Human Sport and Exercise	Spain	Interview (open and semi-structured), participant observation and literature review	Social Relations; Common Good; Shared Values; Quality of Life	Mention
Sacha Smart, Kyle Rich, Allan Lauzon	2020	Journal of Sport for Development	Canada	Semi-structured interviews	Social Relations	Mention
Chris Stone	2017	Leisure Studies	England	Ethnographic methodology (participatory action research, semi-structured group and individual interviews)	Attachment/Belonging	Mention
Agnes Elling, Paul De Knop, Annelies Knoppers	2001	Sociology of Sport Journal	Netherlands	Literature review	Social Relations; Attachment/Belonging; Shared Values; Quality of Life	Mention
Julie D. Guldager, Anja Leppin, Jesper von Seelen, Pernille T. Andersen	2019	Journal of Physical Activity and Health	Denmark	Semi-structured Interviews	Social Relations; Quality of Life	Focus
Ramón Spaaij	2009	Sport in Society	Australia	Semi-structured interviews, focus groups	Social Relations; Attachment/Belonging; Common Good; Shared Values; Quality of Life	Mention
Ramón Spaaij	2011	Ethnic and Racial Studies	Australia	Ethnographic research (participatory observation, interviews, focus groups)	Social Relations; Attachment/Belonging; Common Good; Shared Values; Quality of Life	Mention
Jeroen Vermeulen, Paul Verweel	2009	Sport in Society	Netherlands	Survey, participatory observation	Social Relations; Attachment/Belonging; Common Good	Focus
David Mitchell, Ian Somerville, Owen Hargie	2016	The British Journal of Politics and International Relations	Northern Ireland	Survey, literature review, face-to-face interviews with members of the public and sport representatives	Attachment/Belonging; Social Relations	Focus
Björn Tolgfors	2019	Sport, Education and Society	Sweden, Norway, New Zealand	Participatory lesson observations (e.g. non-verbal communication and contextual data; once or twice per week), 2 semi-structured interviews	Social Relations; Attachment/Belonging; Shared Values	Mention
David Ekholm, Magnus Dahlstedt	2017	Social Inclusion	Sweden	Interviews	Social Relations; Common Good; Shared Values; (In)equality	Mention
Karen Van der Veken, Emelien Lauwerier, Sara Willems	2020	International Journal for Equity in Health	Belgium	Document analysis, participatory observations, in-depth interviews (n = 11), focus group discussion (n = 8)	Social Relations; Attachment/Belonging; Common Good; Shared Values; Quality of Life	Mention

Adams (2016, p. 2) note, many of the ‘problems with which sport is charged with ‘fixing’ are poorly defined, lack clarity and are resistant to clear and agreed solutions’. Social cohesion, for its part, certainly lacks this clarity. Nonetheless, the literature does somewhat coalesce around a set of dimensions. All six core dimensions highlighted by Schiefer and van der Noll (2017) are present, but the selected texts support the contention that social relations, a sense of belonging, shared values and an orientation towards the common good are the central dimensions of social cohesion. Indeed, at least half of the texts within our review include one or more of these elements.

Nonetheless, this conclusion comes from our efforts to read and code the texts. A clear position or definition of social cohesion was not common. This gives the impression that the term is included more for its popularity than its value, whereby authors engage in a sort of ‘concept dropping’ and thus reinforce long-standing criticisms that social cohesion is a ‘quasi-concept’ (Bernard 2002). As others have noted, this vagueness can allow implementers, policymakers and researchers to superimpose their interpretations of social cohesion onto programme design, delivery, measurement and evaluation (Bernard 2002, Raw, Sherry, and Rowe 2022). In other words, if social cohesion can be everything, all programmes can claim its achievement. This lack of clarity also opens the risk that we reproduce neoliberal notions present in many policies, whereby responsibility for social cohesion is assigned to vulnerable individuals instead of the state or privileged groups.

To alleviate these risks, there is a need for research to more precisely and rigorously define social cohesion, its dimensions, its measurement and the interactions between these dimensions. As researchers, at a bare minimum, we need to be transparent about how we define social cohesion, why we adopt a given definition, and what measures, if any, we associate with the term. Clear, applicable definitions are essential for sound science, as they allow researchers to describe the attributes of a meaningful phenomenon and distinguish it from potentially related concepts. Likewise, without clear definitions, it is difficult to identify the causes, consequences or correlates of the main concept (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, and Podsakoff 2016).

Beyond merely establishing a definition, there is a need to unpack the term and its dimensions further. Social cohesion is complex and multi-dimensional, and the dimensions measured or discussed must be further defined. Beyond social relations, the studies here do little to define or elaborate on other areas. Many of the present studies go to great lengths to define social relations using theories of social capital (e.g. Fehsenfeld 2015) or explain how sport can foster relations through intergroup contact (e.g. Smith, et al. 2020). Other dimensions, such as orientation towards the common good or shared values do not receive the same treatment. Yet these areas require the same level of elaboration as social relations. For instance, as Nowack and Schoderer (2020) note, values are often reduced to platitudes and clichés, and not all shared values necessarily support social cohesion. Likewise, in terms of orientation towards the common good, there is a tendency to measure such behaviour via formal social participation such as volunteering, but defining this dimension through only formal channels risks ignoring the increasingly informal or digital ways youth engage in their communities (Harris 2010). In short, to truly understand social cohesion and how to foster it, the main concept and its sub-dimensions require careful definition and discussion.

A more precise and expansive definition of these dimensions also allows for more detailed study of the interactions between those dimensions. Currently, definitions or conceptualisations of social cohesion are presented as a blob where each dimension is of similar value and interact with each other in a more or less equal, bi-directional fashion. The relative

importance of each dimension and how they mutually influence each other has yet to be adequately addressed, despite long-standing calls to explore the interactions and causal relationships between them (e.g. Bernard 2002, Friedkin 2004). For instance, does civic participation or volunteering (i.e. orientation towards the common good) generate a greater sense of belonging, or is a sense of belonging required for this kind of participation? A greater, in-depth exploration of local realities and experiences around social cohesion could greatly assist in helping unearth these connections. In short, we echo Novy, Swiatek, and Moulaert (2012) that 'defining the problem of social cohesion' implies asking the right questions and getting deep insights into the experience of individuals. Though we acknowledge this is an ambitious call, we contend that sport is uniquely well placed to facilitate such theoretical development. Sport has a global presence and is entwined with countless facets of everyday life, including business, education, health, and leisure. Furthermore, sport is academically and discursively connected to numerous elements related to social cohesion, including ideas of national identity, civic participation, well-being, and shared values (e.g. fair play). Thus, the multi-faceted nature of sport makes it an ideal venue to study the complex, multi-faceted reality of social cohesion.

The study of social cohesion must also extend beyond the narrow groups and settings associated with specific programmes and interventions. Few studies document how the 'social cohesion' generated through sport programmes transfers to the broader communities in which these participants are embedded. Most notably, Mousa (2020) looks at the social behaviours of participants in the broader community. However, many of these studies look at how social cohesion within a given target group changes, but not how it might change with respect to groups or contexts outside the intervention setting. In other words, does social cohesion or associated behaviours improve within communities or between communities outside of the programme setting? Though we recognize the numerous logistical and methodological difficulties in doing so, there is a need to expand research beyond an intervention's immediate groups and setting. Otherwise, we may unfairly attribute perceived gains in small group cohesion to broader communities and societies.

Finally, there is a need to track and present the programmatic elements under investigation more rigorously. Only a handful of the studies documented elements such as sport activities, non-sport activities, length or frequency of intervention. Indeed, our findings support the contention that 'much published research lacks detail of the nature, extent and duration of participation required to achieve certain outcomes' (Coalter 2017). Without this information, it is challenging to develop an adequate programme theory outlining how sport-based interventions can foster social cohesion or support specific dimensions. Combined with a clearer picture of the understanding and experience of social cohesion, such information can allow researchers to develop a theory that identifies the components, mechanisms, relationships and causes that may lead to the desired impacts and outcomes (Coalter 2015).

Social cohesion, and indeed social life, is a highly complex, multi-faceted phenomenon. Yet, to encourage action at the programme or political level or to make social cohesion more easily digestible, there seems to be a tendency to oversimplify the concept and the realities around it. The term and its dimensions are reduced to generalizations, obscuring the causes, relations, and consequences of social cohesion itself. For some, this complexity is perhaps a sign that social cohesion is an impractical quasi-concept that need not be explored further. We vehemently disagree with such a position. As researchers, we should not shy away from the reality, and complexity, of social cohesion. It is our responsibility to be as thorough and precise as possible and to unpack the concept and its dimensions. The

topic of social cohesion is ripe for further theoretical and practical development. And, with sports' unique reach across different facets of social life and various academic fields, it is uniquely placed to make significant contributions to this development.

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