

Isolated Leaders of Self-Help Groups in the Internet Age: How Does No-Cost Communication Change Their Organisations?

Tomofumi Oka, Sophia University, Chiyoda City, Tokyo, Japan

I have been researching self-help organisations for over 30 years and have found they have been drastically changed by the advent of the Internet, which has led to group leaders becoming more isolated from other members. As voluntary peer-led organisations in which members share their common experiences to alleviate or solve their problems, self-help groups were once defined by close social interaction. In the Internet age, leaders often prepare meetings by themselves and have less interaction with other members, despite many groups claiming all members participate in group organisational activities. How can we understand the change in these organisations? One way is through the no-cost communication facilitated by the Internet: groups can now send newsletters and make public announcements at no cost. Consequently, the organisations are able to lower subscriptions and it is easier to manage their organisations – but at the cost of human interaction. Modern self-help groups, I argue, can be modelled as being doughnut-shaped, with the leaders positioned at the hole in the middle, isolated by a surrounding void. The widespread phenomenon of “membership apathy” (Pearce, 1980) means many members do not want to take leadership roles in voluntary organisations, and this apathy has been aggravated by the Internet. However, my research has found that because self-help group participants have a strong sense of group identity produced by the commonality of their life situation, some groups have successfully resisted such apathy and adapted to the Internet age.

Identity and Belonging

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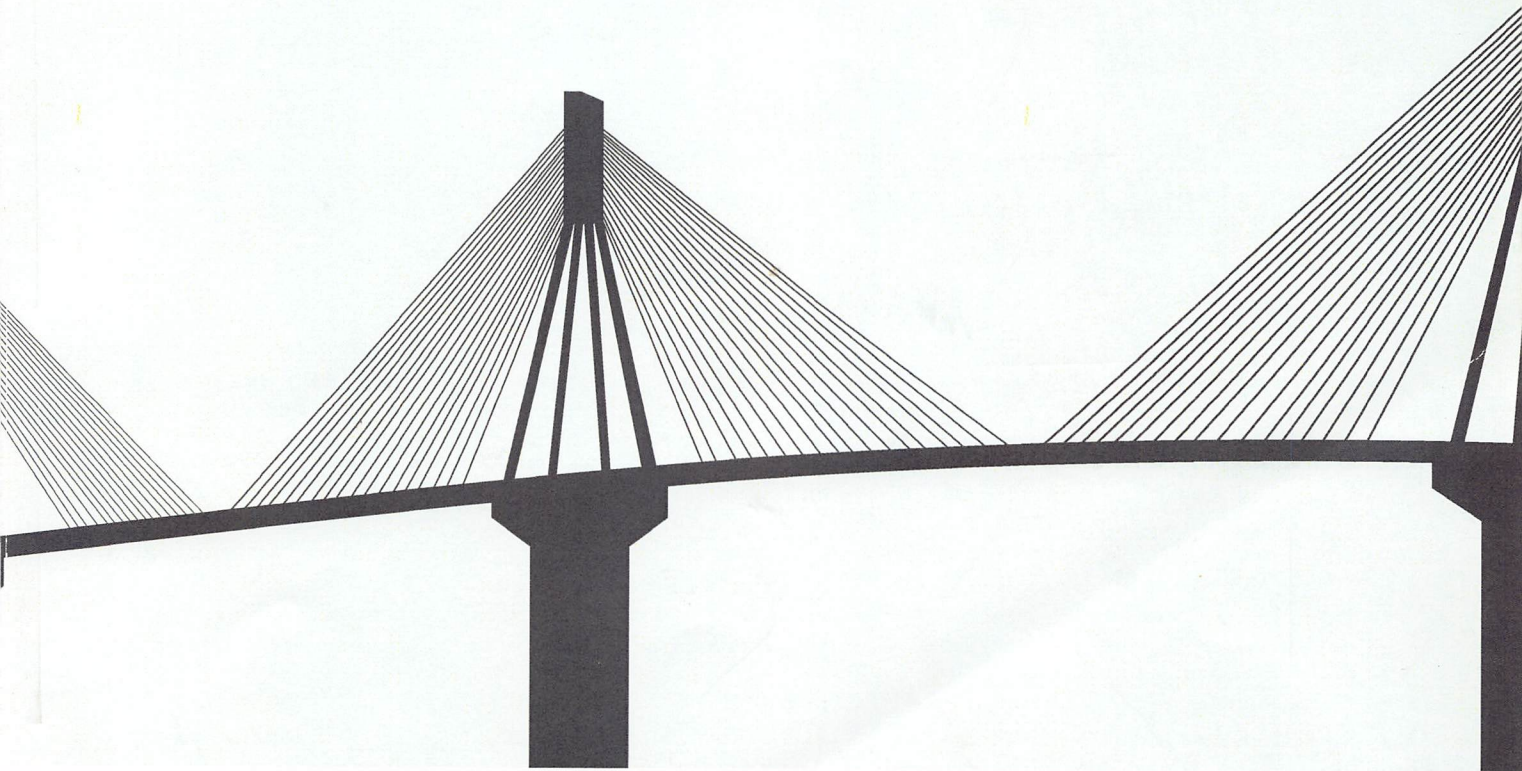
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5-7 June 2019

University of Patras

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