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Apocalypticism as a Predictor of Conspiracism Among American Adults

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Introduction

Apocalypticism, despite being a common trait among Americans, has been researched very little within the social sciences. There have been many large-scale events within the last few decades that were predicted to be apocalyptic, including but not limited to the following: Y2k, the ending of the Mayan Calendar in 2012, and most recently, the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite the prevalence of apocalypticism and the many recent “apocalypses” that have been endured, little research has been done on this phenomenon nor on the social consequences of such beliefs.

Defining apocalypse: “In its more generic usage, the word ‘apocalypse’ has come to mean the belief in an approaching confrontation, cataclysmic event, or transformation of epochal proportion, about which a select few have forewarning so they can make appropriate preparations” (Berlet 2004). The apocalypse is a key feature of many major religions. However, this does not mean non-religious people are immune to the idea of apocalypticism. Unlike their religious counterparts, secular apocalypses believe in a non-supernatural apocalypse and should not be overlooked in apocalyptic research.

Current research suggests apocalypticism may be related to negative societal outcomes such as conspiracism. Though research on apocalypticism is scarce, research on conspiracism is more comprehensive and has consistently been related with negative societal effects such as authoritarian violence, belief in fake news and antisemitism. A conspiracy theory can be defined as “proposed explanation of events that cites as a main causal factor a small group of persons (the conspirators) acting in secret for their own benefit, against the common good” (Uscinski et al., 2016). Conspiracism has become more mainstream in the last few years, and politicians have utilized apocalyptic language to facilitate this social shift.

Methods and Materials

The dataset used for this study was obtained from the 2018 Chapman Survey of American Fears. The sample size is 1189, nationally-representative sample of American adults.

Using this survey, we measured apocalypticism using the item; “Please indicate the extent to which you believe each of the following exists: Apocalypse/Armageddon”. The answer options on this question are on a Likert scale with the response options: definitely does not exist, probably does not exist, probably exists, and definitely exists.

A multi-item conspiracism scale (Cronbach’s alpha = .90) was composed of questions that began with “the government is concealing what it knows about . . .” followed by these eight items were used: alien encounters, the 9/11 attacks, the South Dakota crash, global warming, the JFK assassination, the moon landing, the Illuminati/New World Order and Mass shootings such as those at Sandy Hook, Las Vegas, and Parkland. The respondents chose from the Likert scale options with the following options: strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree. An OLS regression was performed to test whether apocalypticism predicts conspiracism.

Results

A linear regression was used to test if apocalypticism significantly predicted conspiracism.

It was found that apocalypticism significantly predicted conspiracism ($\beta = .242$ $p < .000$), and was the stronger predictor in the model. The second strongest predictor was education level ($\beta = -.142$ $p < .000$),

	Standardized Coefficients Beta	Significance
Apocalypse	.248	P=<.000
Education	-.142	P=<.001
Gender	-.135	P=<.001
Political Party	.033	P=<.821

Table 2 Other variables used for comparison include age, income, race employment, income, religion, geographic region and religious attendance

Apocalypse	Mean	Sample Size	Standard Deviation
Definitely does not exist	16.76	233	6.01
Probably does not exist	18.29	293	5.50
Probably exists	20.43	304	6.48
Definitely exists	21.30	333	6.12

Table 1. How the sample responded to the apocalypticism measure

Discussion

Apocalypticism was found to be the most predictive variable within the entire analysis. These results indicate that apocalypticism is a vital factor to consider in the study of conspiracism. Further research should be conducted to determine whether this prevalent phenomenon is associated with other negative societal outcomes. Future scholars should consider an experimental design to determine directionality.

Contact

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