

## **“Don’t Be Silent” – An Interview With James Coan About Family Separation And Science Outreach**

In what is probably today’s most hotly discussed political and cultural topic in the United States, recent changes in immigration policy have led to the [separation of several thousand children from their families](#). While many aspects of this policy change are still being discussed, modified, or even reversed, experts across the country have weighed in on the effect that this ambiguous legal and political situation might have on the children that are caught in the middle of it.

We talked about this with SPR member Jim Coan. Jim is Professor of Psychology at the University of Virginia, where he directs the Virginia Affective Neuroscience Laboratory and hosts the science podcast Circle of Willis. He is a first-generation college student from Spokane Washington. He did his undergraduate work at Shoreline Community College and the University of Washington, both in Seattle, and his graduate work at the University of Arizona, under the supervision of John Allen and Lee Sechrest. Before beginning his position at the University of Virginia, he did postdoctoral work at the University of Wisconsin, under the supervision of Richard Davidson.

On his podcast, Jim has tackled the difficult topic of family separation at the border by talking to world-leading experts and by using his outreach platform to discuss the scientific side of an issue that is important on an emotional as well as political level. Here, we asked Jim about his science outreach efforts, and about his motivation behind tackling this particular story.

*Last year you started a science podcast named "Circle of Willis". Can you give us a little bit of background about that?*

[CIRCLE OF WILLIS](#) evolved slowly and in tandem with the rise of scientific controversies on social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook. Even in the early days of Facebook's science battles, I was uncomfortable with an emerging level of negativity and hyperbole that seemed completely unnecessary (and unprecedented). Actually, [SPR](#) probably shaped my perspective on this. Collegial scientific debate is part of SPR's intellectual DNA. I recall, for example, that in my first year of graduate school, my advisor ([John Allen](#)) published-- in [PSYCHOPHYSIOLOGY](#)--[a high-powered failure to replicate](#) some of [Richie Davidson](#)'s work linking frontal EEG asymmetry to depression. That paper raised eyebrows and fueled concerns about those earlier findings, but I don't recall at any point the hostility and defensiveness we now see *every day* on social media.

Social media "likes" and clicks tend to reinforce bold pronouncements, expressed in moral terms that [increase your in-group cachet](#). So we are told that whole research programs

"don't replicate" or have been "debunked." Or that researchers critical of a study or program of research are cold-hearted bullies with hidden agendas. My concern came to a head in 2014 when, at the annual meeting of the [Association for Psychological Science](#), I was shocked by the level of vitriol expressed by all sides of the emerging "replication crisis."

So I wrote a blog post about it ([Negative Psychology, on Medium](#))--really the only blog post I have ever written or intend to write. After complaining about the state of things as I saw it, I suggested that scientists needed to spend more time discussing each others' work face to face, at professional meetings and things like that.

But then a friend on social media complained that my recommendation reflected my privilege. That is, he felt that most scholars--especially early career scholars or those from underrepresented groups--didn't have the level of resources I had to get to those meetings, and



that, if my scientific conversations wound up being rich and impactful *for me*, they'd continue to leave everyone else out. If social media conversations were more sensationalized and contentious, they also had the very real advantage of being accessible to all. To be honest, this stumped me for a while. I thought, well, I guess it's just a tradeoff and nothing really can be done.

But then an [NPR](#) reporter named [Barbara Bradley Hagerty](#) came and did [a story on my lab](#), and in the course of our conversations, we talked privately about the social media issue. I told her about the tradeoff I perceived, and she suggested a podcast might be a good way to solve the problem. "Just go and record your conversations and put them on the web," she said (I'm paraphrasing).

*What motivated you to use the podcast format for science outreach?*

My biggest motivation for doing a podcast was to share with the world the unique conversations I get to have all the time with fascinating colleagues--to get these conversations out of the conference bar and into people's headphones. If controversies or disagreements arise in these conversations (and they do, a lot), all the better--we need to talk about the problems in our work as much as anything else, with *talk* being the operative word. But in thinking about why I wanted to emphasize talking so much, I realized that a huge part of the fun--and indeed of what's *interesting*--in these conversations is the bonding that occurs, the

relationships we build. Many of the people I talk to in the first season of the podcast are old friends as much as colleagues. But just as many were more or less complete strangers before we sat down in front of the microphones, and *still* I came away from those conversations feeling like we were close. Good conversations are almost always like that. And I think that's because the best conversations are never limited to the work we do. They are also about who we are and where we come from. I like to get that out of people. It does mean the conversations can be long, but that's just another way in which the best conversations manifest--you don't want them to stop. I find that the podcast format is very accommodating to conversations of varying length. So some episodes are 40 minutes while others are 90. Plus, you don't have to sit down and watch a podcast, or read a podcast. With a podcast, you can do laundry while listening, or exercise, or listen on your commute, or whatever. That's a major advantage.

## ***“There is so much interesting work out there”***

*Was this your first venture into science outreach?*

I've had [plenty of experiences](#) with popular media, but my first real venture into science outreach was work I had done on National Geographic's [BRAIN GAMES](#) (now in syndication on Netflix) a few years ago. I appeared in [9 episodes](#) as a kind of expert commentator, talking about other people's research, running little experiments, and things like that. It was fun to talk about research other than my own. It was more than fun, actually--it felt exhilarating. There is so much interesting work out there, and I loved letting my enthusiasm for that work gush on TV. It was also tremendous fun to work with professional writers, and from a script, which was something I'd never done before.

CIRCLE OF WILLIS has been pretty different, but it still feels nice to have a team to work with. For example, I have sponsorship from Virginia Quarterly Review, or [VQR](#), from the [Center for Media and Citizenship](#), and from the [TEEJ.FM](#) podcast network, which is a production of Charlottesville radio station [WTJU](#). And I've been very fortunate to work with the brilliant [Siva Vaidhyanathan](#), who serves as my Executive Producer. I get amazing music from [Tom Stauffer](#). I also get occasional and badly needed help from [Lulu Miller](#), plucky genius co-founder of the popular podcast [Invisibilia](#). It's sort of ridiculous, how lucky I am.

*What kinds of responses have you gotten so far?*

Responses have been overwhelmingly positive. The podcast listenership *did* grow a lot faster than I'd anticipated and that was a little stressful at first, to be perfectly honest. I think I expected it to mostly just get passed around to some close colleagues and friends, and then all of a sudden downloads are in the thousands and I'm like, "aaahhhh." I didn't deeply understand the impact and reach of some of my early guests, especially people like [Eli Finkel](#), [Lisa Feldman Barrett](#), [David Sloan Wilson](#), [Marco Iacoboni](#), [Simine Vazire](#), and of course, SPR giants like [John Cacioppo](#). Now that I list the guests I've talked to, I guess it isn't as surprising. And there are more amazing guests forthcoming. People like Susan Johnson, Steve Hayes, Brian Nosek, Abigail Marsh, SPR hero John Allen, David Barlow... It goes on and on like this. And I'm recording new conversations all the time.

*Do you think that this work has changed how you think about your own research?*

Absolutely, and maybe not in the way you might think. The first and biggest effect of my experience with both BRAIN GAMES and CIRCLE OF WILLIS is to realize that my own research program, which seems like everything to me when it's my sole focus, is actually a pretty small contribution to a massive, kaleidoscopic, recombinative and collaborative accrual of new knowledge. I have learned on the one hand that neither I nor my work are all that special. On the other hand, I've learned that specialness is found in the *process* of doing the work I do, of making sure that my work is of high quality, and of interacting with my friends and colleagues.

When John Cacioppo died, I went back into the master recordings of our conversation to see if there might have been anything in them that I missed during the editing process, and I found the most amazing quote--something I can't believe I allowed to get edited out of the original episode. I released it in [a brief memorial](#) to him. It was this:

*"You want to be able to contribute a brick to the temple of science...but recognize that, whether you know it or not, by your death, or shortly after your death, that will be an anonymous brick...and, if you accept that you're going to do it anonymously...the value isn't the reward of fame, it's that you never had to go to work in your whole life."*

Not coincidentally, this attitude, shared so generously and believably by John, reminded me of SPR itself, of the fact that participation in this amazing society makes working so much fun and personally enriching. SPR is a special organization. The researchers populating it have always been lovely, generous, *and* deeply committed to good science, to accurate measurement, to rigorous design. I think all of the above are reflected in the [long list of guideline papers](#) at sprweb.org, for example.

*One recent episode of your podcast was quite special: you asked multiple experts on developmental psychology about their comments on the policy of family separation at the border. As you say yourself, your podcast is not meant to be political - what motivated you to delve into this topic?*

Before putting [Children at the Border](#) together, I was listening to an early newscast about the policy of separating children from their families at the border and it caused me such distress that I kind of worried I might be going crazy. Specifically, I heard a father describing a child being forcibly pulled from his arms by border agents and, in a flash, I involuntarily visualized this happening to me and my own small child. That visualization quickly graduated to the status of Intrusive Thoughts that started making it hard for me to even get through the day. At some point, my wife urged me to do something about it instead of just sitting around ruminating.

I made a list of several researchers I knew who'd be able to speak much more knowledgeably about what the consequences of this policy might be, and wrote to them asking if I could record brief phone conversations. I was astoundingly and unaccountably lucky to interview Jude Cassidy, Dylan Gee, Megan Gunnar, Charles Nelson, and Nim Tottenham. And Lulu Miller helped me produce a very different kind of episode than is typical for the podcast.

As for politics...I guess I thought it was disingenuous to pretend to be apolitical, or to pretend that my guests are apolitical. In an early edit of the episode, I had scrubbed my interviews of anything that sounded like a moral judgement or even a political point of view. I must have thought that would render the science more credible. And then I thought, *we're talking about traumatizing children*, which takes things to a space that really is kind of apolitical--to a *moral* space that certainly can and should cut across political affiliation. So I put all those bits back in, and reminded my listeners of what they should all know anyway, which is that scientists are at once humans with human feelings *and* scientists with decades of combined scholarship and experience. These things are not contradictory. So if CIRCLE OF WILLIS is not explicitly political--and it isn't--then it is nevertheless true that scientists have political feelings that are absolutely welcome in the conversations we have. For an earlier example of this, check out my conversation with [Lisa Diamond](#).

## ***“Our brains equate separation from our parents with a death sentence”***

*What have you learned from chatting with experts about this?*

Because I'm a human person myself, it was *intuitively* obvious to me that separating children from their families was a monstrous thing to do. But I only had a superficial knowledge of why my brain might be reacting that way. The experts I talked to laid it all out for me. We experience such high levels of distress because our brains equate separation from our parents with a death sentence -- something that was undoubtedly true over evolutionary time. That's bad enough, but we can't sustain that level of distress indefinitely, and the process of

*accepting*, if you could call it that, the disappearance of a parent, changes the way a child's nervous system develops. That change entails early maturation, which reduces behavioral and regulatory flexibility on the one hand, and increases threat sensitivity on the other. In combination, these children are more likely to engage in poor health behavior -- think self-medicating, risky sex, favoring short term over long term goals -- and to weather their bodies with chronic threat responding. That's going to mean a lifetime of relatively impaired health and well being, as well as lower life expectancy. This is serious business.

*In your opinion, how can a scientific perspective influence the public or political sphere? What would scientists have to do different if they want to bring their research into public focus?*

In [Children at the Border](#), I ask the question: "do I think we need to understand the neuroscience and physiology of trauma to know that what is happening to these children is wrong?" And I answer my own question: "No, I don't. But I do think that science can add an important layer of depth to this conversation, as well as a perspective that might aid our understanding of just how damaging a policy like this can be." I think this is generally true for a lot of what troubles society. We can have a strong sense, for example, that it isn't right to dump chemical waste products into our rivers, but knowing *why*, adds, as I said, a layer of depth to our understanding that can be, and often becomes, an essential part of our decision-making process.

I guess ideally politicians from all philosophical points of view (not to mention ordinary citizens) can and should use science to inform their decisions. Things get trickier when a political party starts to abandon science as a way of knowing. I think both parties have been guilty of this, but as much as I've been willing to pester my liberal friends about how genetically modified organisms (GMOs) are safe, organic food is unlikely to improve your health, or that vaccinations are overwhelmingly safe and effective, the current GOP administration is anti-science to a degree that is unprecedented in my lifetime and unacceptable in any case. I don't see much point in saying otherwise, and so I say it. Often. I encourage my colleagues to do the same.

If I were to say that scientists need to be doing anything differently, it would be to work harder to engage the public and their elected officials in terms that non-specialists can understand. We are not doing our science in a political vacuum, and neither acknowledging that nor working harder to engage the public requires us to relax the rigor of our work. With regard to the current administration, *even doing science at all* is becoming a quasi-political act, so you might as well go all in.

# ***“I'd like to see a lot more scientists in government”***

I'd also remind my scientist friends that, scientists or not, they are also citizens participating in a representative democracy. As such, they have a point of view that merits a hearing on the political stage. So let your representatives know your point of view. Be unafraid to cite scientific evidence as *informing* that point of view. And maybe *become a representative yourself*, by running for office. Personally, I'd like to see a lot more scientists in government.

Also, call or write to your local newspapers and tell them that you are a scientist with something to say. Shortly after I released *Children at the Border*, [I wrote an op-ed](#) summarizing the episode for the [Washington Post](#). I think newspapers all over the country are interested in what we have to say, and when we take the time to write our own articles, we have more control over what is communicated. So *do that*. [Jay Van Bavel](#) had more to say about this in [my conversation with him](#).

*What is the one message you would like to send to SPR members, and to the larger scientific community?*

Three messages!

- Your life history is an important part of your work--more important than you probably think. I recommend pondering that, and making it a priority to know the life histories of your SPR colleagues.
- Your colleagues are inextricably woven into everything from your ability to set up your psychophysiology equipment properly to your theoretical ideas, your professional development, and even your psychological well being, if not your physical health. Love them.
- Your expertise and training are extremely valuable and the world needs you. Don't be silent.

*Jim, thank you very much for this interesting and enlightening conversation!*