



# All gates lead to smoking: The ‘gateway theory’, e-cigarettes and the remaking of nicotine



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## ABSTRACT

The idea that drug use in ‘softer’ forms leads to ‘harder’ drug use lies at the heart of the gateway theory, one of the most influential models of drug use of the twentieth century. Although hotly contested, the notion of the ‘gateway drug’ continues to rear its head in discussions of drug use—most recently in the context of electronic cigarettes. Based on a critical reading of a range of texts, including scholarly literature and media reports, we explore the history and gestation of the gateway theory, highlighting the ways in which intersections between academic, media and popular accounts actively produced the concept. Arguing that the theory has been critical in maintaining the distinction between ‘soft’ and ‘hard’ drugs, we turn to its distinctive iteration in the context of debates about e-cigarettes. We show that the notion of the ‘gateway’ has been transformed from a descriptive to a predictive model, one in which nicotine is constituted as simultaneously ‘soft’ and ‘hard’—as both relatively innocuous and incontrovertibly harmful.

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## 1. Introduction

The idea that drug use in ostensibly harmless forms engenders more harmful drug use took hold in the twentieth century in tandem with increasing efforts to regulate and restrict drugs, reaching its epitome in the ‘gateway theory’ (also known as the ‘gateway hypothesis’). As its name suggests, the assumption at the heart of this concept is that certain drugs act as a ‘gateway’ to the usage of other drugs. This notion is readily invoked in discussions of a variety of substances, from cigarettes and alcohol, to cannabis and solvents. It has also featured prominently in debates about newer products such as electronic cigarettes (or ‘e-cigarettes’). However, although a seemingly straightforward theory, it is one with a complicated gestation and history.

In this paper we explore the history of this concept, highlighting the intersections between academic, media and popular accounts. We focus on the role of the gateway theory in not just *describing* relationships between forms of drug use but in *categorizing* different drugs and *constituting* them as harmful in particular ways. Our interest in the gateway theory and its effects on public discourse about drugs has been provoked by the debates about e-

cigarettes and their relationship to smoking. As we aim to show in the second half of the paper, while the argument that e-cigarette use could lead to young people taking up smoking explicitly deploys the gateway theory, it is also quite different from earlier claims about ‘soft’ drugs as a stepping stone to ‘hard’ drugs.

Our exploration of the gateway theory and its re-emergence in debates about e-cigarettes is based on a critical reading of a range of texts, including scholarly literature and media accounts. Academic and policy literature on the gateway theory was found through searches of Google Scholar and media accounts were found through a search of LexisNexis. We also conducted Google Scholar searches to explore the literature discussing e-cigarettes in the context of gateway usage, along with broader Google searches to examine the ways the term ‘gateway’ is currently being employed in the media—both in accounts of e-cigarettes and beyond them.

The analysis that follows is not intended to represent a comprehensive review of the literature on this topic, although we have tried to conduct our search of the relevant bodies of literature in a reasonably organized and logical fashion (further detail is provided in the relevant sections below). Importantly, our goal is not to prove or disprove the veracity of the gateway theory; instead, our approach to this subject matter is influenced by material-semiotic approaches which take account of the role of both signs and things in the production of reality (e.g. Latour, 2007; Fraser and Valentine, 2008; Law, 2009). As Law (2009, p. 142) observes, “If all

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the world is relational, then so too are texts. They come from somewhere and tell particular stories about particular relations". It is these stories we aim to explicate in the paper, focusing particularly on the ways that the concept has been continuously dismantled, reassembled and reappropriated, and its critical role in producing the notion of drug harms.

## 2. The origins of the gateway theory

Any consideration of the origins of the gateway theory must attend to its predecessor, the 'stepping stone theory', which formed the backdrop against which the notion of the 'gateway drug' emerged. The origins of the 'stepping stone' view of drugs are obscure, and sources attribute its roots differently. According to Sifanek and Kaplan (1995), the notion was initially articulated in a pamphlet printed by the U.S. Bureau of Narcotics in 1965 and asserted that drug users who begin with cannabis increase their risk of involvement with LSD, cocaine and heroin. However, Morral et al. (2002) suggest that the concern that marijuana use increases the risk of progressing to other more serious drugs has influenced US drug policy since the 1950s, and Kandel (2002) and Anthony (2012) cite research suggesting that such assertions were made from at least the 1930s. Thus, it seems that the notion of a 'stepping stone' view of drugs drew much of its impetus largely from popular wisdom, which would have it that "a joint today means a junkie tomorrow" (Louiselle and Whitehead, 1971, p. 347).

The origins of the gateway theory are similarly opaque. Denise Kandel is typically credited with introducing the concept in a 1975 paper titled 'Stages in adolescent involvement in drug use' published in *Science* (e.g. van Bilson and Wilke, 1998; Golub and Johnson, 2002; Reid et al., 2007; Vanyukov et al., 2012). In many respects, the paper was set up as a rejoinder to the stepping stone theory, as Kandel began by referencing the widespread view that marijuana is "the first step in drug use", suggesting that this view was both "arbitrary and inadequately documented" (p. 912). Based on two longitudinal cohort surveys conducted with 6453 students from 18 New York high schools, Kandel argued that adolescent drug use has four distinct stages, with adolescents proceeding from beer and wine, to hard liquor and cigarettes, to marijuana, to other illicit drugs (see Fig. 1). She concluded that if adolescents progress to marijuana use (stage 3), this greatly increased their likelihood of using other 'harder' illicit drugs—from about 2–3% to between 16 and 26%. According to Kandel, these stages were unaffected by gender, educational background or ethnicity, although she did allow that they were "probably culturally determined" (p. 914).

Two features of this paper are worth highlighting. First, in contrast to the assumption of marijuana as an inexorable stepping stone to illicit drugs, Kandel made no claims about a causal relationship between the stages of drug use. In her words, "although the data show a clear sequence in drug use, a particular drug does not invariably lead to other drugs higher up the sequence" (p. 914). Second, at no point did Kandel use the term 'gateway' in the article. As far as we have been able to ascertain, the notion of the 'gateway

drug' first appeared in Robert DuPont's 1984 book *Gateway Drugs: a Guide for the Family*, a self-help manual aimed at parents. However, some observers, including DuPont himself, indicate that the term was in use from the late 1970s (DuPont et al., 1990; see also Zinberg, 1986–1987; Kandel, 1989). Therefore, it is likely that the book merely instantiated an idea in wider circulation in drug control discourse and policy. One fact that supports this interpretation is that DuPont was the Director of the National Institute on Drug Abuse and the White House Drug Czar for much of the 1970s.

As its title suggests, *Gateway Drugs: a Guide for the Family* presented gateway drugs as matters of fact that existed 'out there' in the world and whose major appeal lay in their seeming innocuousness, which served to ensnare unsuspecting young people (whom he deemed as being uniquely vulnerable to drug use/abuse). The political utility of the concept must have been readily apparent to DuPont. With a foreword by Ann Landers, and published as Nancy Reagan's "Just Say No" campaign was building momentum, the book emphasized the "unique dangers" of "safe-seeming drugs" (p. 18), although cocaine and amphetamines were included along with alcohol and marijuana as gateway drugs. While acknowledging the multi-causal nature of the "drug epidemic", DuPont simultaneously highlighted the role of intoxication in causing physically-based dependence and 'harder' drug use. DuPont's underlying emphasis on causal biochemical mechanisms was evident in an interview about the book published in the *Washington Post* in 1985, where he warned that: "there's no telling when the 'addiction switch' will turn on" (Weber, 1985).

All this would suggest that what is today labeled the 'gateway theory' represents the convergence of a distinct series of accounts, from lay models of drug use (the notion of the 'stepping stone'), academic theories (Kandel's 'stages of progression' model) and political constructs (DuPont's 'gateway drugs'). In part, its success rests on its compatibility with popular views of deviance, in which escalation is a common theme. Drug use fits particularly well with ideas of escalation from the seemingly innocuous to the profoundly destructive because drugs are viewed as causal agents in a wide range of "calamities and failures of responsibility", including violence, crime, school failure, family conflict and illness (Room, 2005, p. 149). In addition, drug use is inevitably linked with addiction, understood as an inexorable decline from normality to 'rock bottom' (Keane, 2002). In this cultural and discursive context, the gateway concept makes sense as a description and prediction of problematic behavior.

## 3. Academic and policy literature on the gateway theory

Interest in the idea of the 'gateway theory' or 'gateway drugs' has flourished over the past three decades amongst researchers, clinicians and policy makers. Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to attempt a detailed analysis of the concept in the academic and policy literature, in an attempt to identify broad trends, we conducted Google Scholar searches of both terms in May 2014, limiting ourselves to documents published between 1975 and

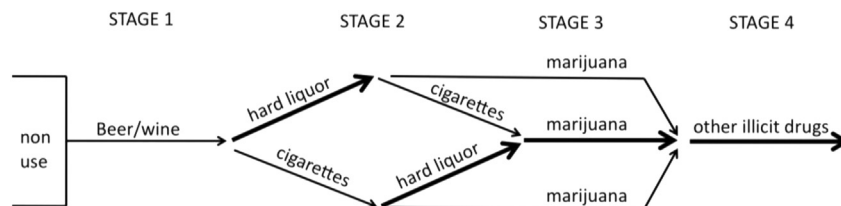


Fig. 1. Kandel's stages model. Modified from Kandel, 1975.

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