frequently provide useful information about what is right and wrong. For example, suppose you and your friends are discussing the best way to get to a concert in another city. If they know the way better than you do, you will probably drive the route they recommend. In this case, your conformity is motivated by a desire to do what is best or right.

Being right is not the only goal we have in social life. We also want to be accepted and liked, and to avoid being rejected and disliked (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Often this need leads people to do what other people are doing. For example, to gain acceptance into a particular social group, you may change your hairstyle or your clothing. We will use the term normative influence when referring to a process in which people conform in order to win the approval of others, or to avoid their disapproval. Under normative influence we strive not to be accurate but to be liked.

Finally, conformity can be driven by a desire to think of ourselves as being a certain kind of person. Many adolescents who start smoking do so not only because of peer pressure (normative influence) but also because they think it makes them cool and sophisticated. We will use the term identity influence when referring to a process in which people conform in order to adopt a particular identity.

In most cases, these three forms of social influence combine to produce conformity. This point was illustrated in an early study by Newcomb (1943). The study was conducted at Bennington College, an elite school located in rural Vermont. The students, all women, came from economically privileged homes and had been raised with traditional, conservative values. In contrast, the faculty at Bennington was quite liberal. Newcomb observed how the women’s conservative attitudes changed as a result of their liberal environment. Newcomb found that the women’s attitudes became increasingly liberal during their college years, because they were taught to believe liberal policies were better (informational influence), because young women with liberal views became the most popular students on campus (normative influence), and because the students wanted to view themselves as enlightened intellectuals who were sophisticated and urbane (identity influence).

Because they often operate together in real-world settings, it is difficult to know which of the three forms of social influence is dominant in any particular situation. The extent to which behavior occurs in private provides a clue. For example, if a person smokes only when he is with his peers and not when he’s alone, we infer that