

An attitude
adjustment: black no
more and internal
change



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In *Black No More*, by George Schuyler, the main character, Max Disher, experiences a scientific procedure that changes his skin from black to white. Originally very proud of his African-American descent, he finds himself transitioning from wishing he were white, to being thankful that he is white, to truly feeling powerful over blacks because he is white. Herbert C. Kelman contextualizes one of the ways to view the surprising changes in attitude during 1930s United States, particularly in *Black No More*, by proposing that opinion change is a process of compliance, identification, and internalization. Kelman discusses this process of attitude change in his article "Compliance, Identification, and Internalization: Three Processes of Attitude Change", featured in the *Journal of Conflict Resolution* in 1958. A professor of social ethics at Harvard University, Kelman is known for meeting with opposing politicians to convince both sides to converge on important issues. He is very knowledgeable about the process of social influence, and this expertise is evident in his article. His ideas are significant because they provide a model as to why Max, other characters in *Black No More*, and many people during the era of racial segregation in the 1930s experienced a complete shift in opinion, and treated blacks in ways they never thought they would. Max Disher's actions at the beginning of the novel can be explained by Kelman's first step in attitude change: compliance. This step is characterized by an individual allowing societal influence in hopes of receiving a favorable reaction from another person or group, as demonstrated by Max's strong desire to fit in with the wealthy, high-status white men. In this stage of Kelman's model, the individual adopts the new behavior not because he believes in its ideals, but because he hopes to gain rewards or approval. We see this from Max right in the beginning of the novel. He has very strong

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attitudes and desires regarding his race, and he thinks that his life would be of much higher quality if he were not a man of color. Max constantly wishes that he were white for the sole purpose of social acceptance, particularly by white women (namely Helen Givens). When Max is at the Honky Tonk Club in the opening scene of the novel, he offers to buy white men alcohol in exchange for social acceptance: "What luck! Here was the very chance he'd been waiting for. These people might invite them over to their table" (Schuyler 4). He hopes that by doing what the white men are requesting, they will invite him to his table. He hates acting like a servant to these superior men, but sets aside his pride for the sake of social approval. Unfortunately, this did not work out as planned. Upon the white men's ignorance of Max, "he returned to his table and eyed the group wistfully" (Schuyler 4). Despite his compliance, his goal was not achieved. Shortly after Max receives the "Black No More" procedure and transforms into a white man, we see him act according to Kelman's next step of attitude change. Identification, Kelman describes, is the process of "accepting influence because he wants to establish or maintain a satisfying self-defining relationship to another person or a group" (Kelman 53). This process involves the individual taking over the role of another person, as seen in a very literal sense by Max becoming his suave, white alias Matthew Fisher. His new physical appearance already makes him feel like a brand new, more important and powerful human: "The world was his oyster and he had the open sesame of a pork-colored skin! The reflection in the mirror gave him a new life and strength" (Schuyler 14). Shortly after leaving the sanitarium, however, Matthew experiences confusion about who he should associate with, and who knows him based on his new identity. "He was not known and

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he belonged to no organization" (Schuyler 36). He comes across a newspaper advertising the Knights of Nordica. " Here, Matthew figured, was just what he had been looking for" (Schuyler 36). A previously very offensive organization to Max, he now sees it as an outlet for him to establish relationships with people of his kind. He expresses immediate interest, and is enthralled by the social approval he receives upon entering. When speaking to Givens, Matthew exclaims that " it has always seemed to [him] that there was no question in American life more important than that of preserving the integrity of the white race. We all know what has been the fate of those nations that have permitted their blood to be polluted with that of inferior races" (Schuyler 38). Despite having recited this argument from a newspaper, this moment marks the transition in Matthew's attitudes from tolerant of whites to approving of whites. This is the first time he vocalizes a segregated mindset, and despite the very performance-like quality of his monologue, these words catch the reader off guard coming out of Matthew's mouth. By speaking these words aloud, he affirms to himself that this was the newfound attitude he was supposed to adopt. Hearing himself say such formerly offensive things essentially tricked him into thinking that he believed them. This furthers how deeply he identifies with his new white self. Matthew deepens his acceptance of white supremacy when he speaks to the Knights of Nordica. " For an hour, Matthew told them at the top of his voice what they believed: i. e., that a white skin was a sure indication of the possession of superior intellectual and moral qualities; that all Negroes were inferior to them; that God has intended for the United States to be a white man's country and that with His help they could keep it so; that their sons and brothers might inadequately marry Negroes, if Black-No-More,

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Incorporated, was permitted to continue its dangerous activities” (Schuyler 45). Soon after, Matthew becomes one of the leaders of the Knights of Nordica. This type of change is also evident later in chapter 6, when several Negro leaders speak to white audiences on behalf of the Knights of Nordica. This allowance of influence by social factors matches the mindset of many liberal whites in the 1930s that were convinced that whites were far supreme. Kelman’s model of identification speaks to this change. The final stage of Kelman’s model discusses internalization, which describes the deepest form of an individual’s attitude change. He or she accepts the new behavior because the ideas it encompasses are intrinsically rewarding. “ He adopts the induced behavior because it is congruent with his value system” (Kelman 53). This satisfaction in internalization is derived from the content of the behavior, which results in a complete attitude shift. While there are instances of this in the novel, such as Matthew declaring that he would kill his black baby before people knew his true race, I do not think that Kelman’s idea of true internalization is reached, due to the complexity of Matthew’s attitude change being tied to his physical change of race. While Kelman’s model provides an interesting perspective on the social influence of the characters in *Black No More*, it does not account for the all of complexities that Matthew’s change in race bring. Kelman’s theory is a great depiction of how an individual goes through the process of attitude change, but since racial segregation was (and is) an issue that entails so many consequences and motivations, there are obviously many other reasons as to why Matthew changed his behaviors accordingly, in addition to the reasons Kelman describes. Matthew’s situation also makes it difficult for him maintain a consistent set of values in because of the convolution of the nature of race.

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He feels like he needs to act white, because of his skin tone, but was raised black, and this causes an internal conflict. W. E. B. DuBois coined the term for this double internal life, called double consciousness. “ This sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder” (DuBois Ch. 1) This term originally referred to the challenge of living as an African man with a European upbringing, but can very directly apply to Black No More. The same inconsistency between different identities is found in the novel, and it causes a tension in how Matthew feels he should act around certain people. He finds it difficult to keep his opinions congruent with whites or blacks, because he is, in the most literal sense possible, both races. In this very strange circumstance, Kelman’s model might not speak to all the possible causes of attitude change. While Kelman’s theory presents an interesting explanation as to the ways individuals’ opinions change, race is a far too complex topic for the processes he describes to independently cause an internal change, particularly in Matthew’s situation of race transformation. Compliance, identification, and internalization are all definite ways that people change their attitudes, but the intricacy of race calls for too many motivations and consequences to give one definite answer.