

how to converse with retaining attorneys, including salient points of caution.

Disclosures of financial or other potential conflicts of interest: None.

## A Forensic Analysis of the Netflix Film *Hit Man*

Directed by Richard Linklater. Screenplay by Richard Linklater and Glen Powell. 115 minutes. Distributed by Netflix; Released September 5, 2023 (Venice); May 24, 2024 (United States); June 7, 2024 (Netflix)

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Richard Linklater's latest film, *Hit Man*, is a departure from his usual relationship dramedies, such as *Before Sunrise* and *Boyhood*. This film has more comedy and irony than drama or romance and yet also has deep and impactful moments touching on philosophy, the psychology of personality, the concept of entrapment, and attempted murder. It is also outlandish and far-fetched at times, but that is easily forgiven because of the heart-warming and flawed protagonist, Gary Johnson.

Gary Johnson (played expertly by Glen Powell of recent *Top Gun* and *Anyone But You* fame) is a unique and delightful combination of philosophy professor and undercover hitman in New Orleans. Gary, the philosophy professor, is a bit nerdy, single, loves cats, and has never killed anyone in his life. His alter ego, Ron, is a confident, more masculine version with slicked back hair and witty banter who likes dogs and has no problem picking up women.

In the beginning of the movie, Gary insists to the audience that Hollywood contract killers do not exist and that the people portrayed in movies like *The Professional* are not real. In fact, according to a piece by Skip Hollandsworth,<sup>1</sup> the movie *Hit Man* is based on the real experiences of a real contract killer named Gary Johnson who actually works for the police. Like Powell's Gary Johnson, Hollandsworth presented

the real Gary Johnson as having two cats, going by multiple aliases, and agreeing to kill whomever his jilted wife, ex-lover, or disgruntled employee client asks him to kill. The real Gary Johnson was originally from Louisiana, became a staff investigator for the Harris County district attorney's office, and was on call at all times for police departments in the Houston area.<sup>1</sup>

In the film, after Gary teaches his class about identity, he has lunch with his ex-wife and friend, Alicia (played by Molly Bernard). Alicia, a therapist who studies personality, explains her belief to Gary that people can change their personality if they really try and act "as if." Alicia explains the Big Five personality dimensions that are found in the personality inventory for the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition (DSM-5), which include extraversion, neuroticism, agreeableness, conscientiousness, and openness or intellect.<sup>2</sup> Although Gary is skeptical that people can change, he is intrigued, and this idea of changing one's personality becomes the theme of the film. Ironically, Gary's ability to take on different aliases for his different clients are an example of changing one's personality at least temporarily for an external goal.

To help catch the people who hire him, Gary is wired with the police in a nearby van. He meets the client at a diner called The Please U Café and solidifies the contract, including the money exchange with the client. Before Gary leaves, he has the clients say out loud their intention to have Gary kill their intended target. When the unsuspecting subject leaves the café, the police come up and give the *Miranda* warning. At trial, the defense attorneys claim that Gary is the cause of their arrest and use entrapment as the defense.

According to the Texas Penal Code §8.06:

(a) It is a defense to prosecution that the actor engaged in the conduct charged because he was induced to do so by a law enforcement agent using persuasion or other means likely to cause persons to commit the offense. Conduct merely affording a person an opportunity to commit an offense does not constitute entrapment. (b) In this section "law enforcement agent" includes personnel of the state and local law enforcement agencies as well as of the United States and any person acting in accordance with instructions from such agents.<sup>3</sup>

Because the clients' requests of Gary are self-initiated, occur in a public place, and involve an exchange of money all before the police become involved, this defense rarely works. In addition, the U.S. Supreme

Court in *Illinois v. Perkins* (1990)<sup>4</sup> held that “[A]n undercover law enforcement officer posing as a fellow inmate need not give Miranda warnings to an incarcerated suspect before asking questions that may elicit an incriminating response” (Ref. 4, p 300).

Gary’s favorite alias is Ron because he meets his love interest, Madison, as Ron. Madison is in an intimate violence situation with her partner, and she wants out. Many of Gary’s clients in *Hit Man* seem motivated by money or jealousy and call Gary about murdering their partners or ex-lovers. Most research on intimate partner violence, however, indicates that the violence is usually the result of years of abuse.<sup>5</sup> Stockl *et al.*<sup>5</sup> reported that at least one in seven homicides globally are committed by an intimate partner. When victims are women, a third of these female homicide victims were killed by their intimate partners. It is not clear how premeditated these killings are, but homicides are more likely to occur when guns are involved.<sup>6</sup>

In my opinion, the most interesting part of the movie is Gary Johnson’s character growth. This is exemplified as Gary ultimately does take Alicia’s advice to heart and is able to change his personality enough to accommodate another person and have a healthy adult relationship. In the end, he narrates, “As love can do, somewhere along the way, it changed me. I eventually found the proper cocktail of Gary and Ron.”

According to Hudson and Fraley,<sup>7</sup> we can change our personality in our desired direction. The authors point out that millions are spent each year on therapy, retreats, and other interventions with a goal of changing one’s personality. Their data showed that, when people set explicit goals for change over a three-week period, as opposed to vague goals, they

were able to make changes in their desired direction. For example, if the goal were to become more extraverted, there were daily behavior changes that led to predicted changes in the personality trait.<sup>7</sup>

Once again, Mark Twain’s quotation “Truth is stranger than fiction” is applicable to this movie based on a real contract killer who worked for law enforcement in Texas. Although the imagination is stretched at times, Linklater once again provides an interesting look at relationships and human nature in this quirky romantic comedy with both dark and light elements. Because of the themes of intimate partner homicide, police entrapment, and personality change, this film will be of interest to many forensic psychiatrists.

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