

We sit down to talk about serious subjects, sobering subjects, but my first meeting with Estela Welldon soon takes on a faintly hysterical hue. This pioneering forensic psychotherapist, an Argentinian who has spent her life guiding criminals through psychoanalysis, talking through their cobwebbed unconscious, has just been giving a lecture to colleagues, and her voice is depleted, distinctly croaky. In a Brighton restaurant, over lunch, I have to lean in closely to hear her theories.

"Perversions are all really, symbolically speaking, attacks against the [pregnant] woman's body," she is saying. "Let's not talk any more about penis envy, envy to the breast, envy to the womb. Envy is towards the pregnant body. A fecund woman represents an erected penis, sperm flowing." Our waiter blanches as he approaches, and Welldon addresses him, without pause. "Do we have any sauce with this?" She gestures to our tandoori chicken. "Because I will need some sauce. Nice virgin olive oil?" He nods meekly. "That would be great!"

She turns to me. "Over the last five years I have had so many cancers. I have had one of my epiglottis, and in chemotherapy, a lot of the salivary glands have gone, so I need some lubrication. But so!" She takes a slug of wine. "We were talking about women, and there is something so appealing about a pregnant woman, but they are also the most vulnerable to attacks, even from their husbands or partners." All manner of crimes can be understood, symbolically, from this perspective, she explains. "In any attack against a house, for instance, taking things away from it, or shitting on it, it's always a representation of the mother's body that's being attacked".

Welldon had planned to have a big family herself until her husband, a psychiatrist, died suddenly at the age of 38. Their son, her only child, was nine months old. She had experienced another early bereavement, aged 11, when her 14-year-old brother died of complications related to appendicitis. "What has become very clear to me is that I had more traumas than many people - more traumas than many of my patients. But for some reason I am capable of dealing with that. And some people are not. And it is a question of being compassionate. It's possible to have many traumas, and survive them all, but become rather hard. But I feel compassionate about people who can't deal with their problems."

We talk about her most difficult, frightening clients, our conversation peppered with profanity, and I repeat

'I speak my mind. Patients take that very well'

Estela Welldon believes that behind all human perversion lies an envy of the pregnant woman's body. **Kira Cochrane** talks to the radical forensic psychotherapist about her own traumatic life - and the dangers of her job



Welldon on Brighton beach
Photographs by Felix Clay for the Guardian

everything loudly, to ensure I'm understanding her correctly. A man sits down at the piano behind us. He starts playing jazz classics at an aggressive volume. I find myself bellowing "so your client wanted to stick his umbrella up people's bottoms", to the accompaniment of A Nightingale Sang in Berkeley Square. Heads swivel. Forks clatter. I start to feel mildly beaten.

A few weeks later, we meet again at Welldon's London home, a warren of art, cushions and expensive chocolates that suits its owner's effusive nature. In her mid-70s, she is youthful, glamorous and unstintingly direct. She has shaped the whole field of forensic psychotherapy - she was founding director of the first diploma course in 1990, founding president of its first professional organisation, the International Association for Forensic Psychotherapy, in 1991. And this year her ideas have been collected in the book, *Playing with Dynamite: A Personal Approach to the Psychoanalytic Understanding of Perversions, Violence and Criminality*.

The book comprises interviews with Welldon, and her essays on subjects such as perverted motherhood and Münchhausen syndrome by proxy. I was nervous before reading it. There are areas of human behaviour I'm happy to leave vague. But Welldon has an ability to address them, both in conversation and on the page, in a way that allows you to peer closely without imminent danger of throwing up.

Welldon has been a pioneer in a field that most people, perhaps, would either find terrifying, or enter armed with naive, romantic rescue fantasies. In the book, she says she has always felt extremely comfortable working with the most difficult cases of sexual deviance or delinquency. I ask what gives her this capacity, and she says she has an "enormous amount of violence myself, and I think the patients know that too. People have said to me, 'You are so small,' and have asked if I've ever felt scared. I said no."

The only really worrying incident was when a woman insisted on bringing a gun to their sessions. "I said: 'Listen, I'm sure I'm going to give you an interpretation, and you're not going to like it, and I will be scared to do that because you will be carrying a gun.' She told me she had killed a lot of people in the past, but had never been caught."

The field often attracts "do-gooders", says Welldon, who are singularly ill-suited to it. The only physical attack she has ever witnessed at work took place when a colleague comforted a client by patting them sympa- >>>

thetically, prompting an explosive reaction. "Touching them?" she says, "No way. Also, if somebody's saying nobody wants them, and wants to talk about the parts of themselves that are bad, or hateful, they don't want to hear: 'You're actually really nice.' Fuck you! I mean, honestly, it's so condescending, and you're not seeing what the patient wants to give you."

"If you want to be loved and liked, don't go into psychotherapy. Because you have to put up with people hating you, because they have not been able to express that hatred to the real people who didn't take care of them, didn't welcome them, ignored them. Sometimes the people who were in charge of them as children were extremely abusive, physically or sexually, verbally, everything. And they couldn't express any anger, because they were completely dependent on them. So, in therapy, you have to take that hatred on." She and her colleagues have extensive psychoanalysis themselves, which helps with the impact of their work; also, she says, she has a hardness that makes it easier. "The first time someone said to me, 'You are so hard,' I said: 'Are you crazy?' And then I realised my own students have told me something similar, because I am

really confrontational. I speak my mind. Patients take that very well."

Welldon grew up in Mendoza, Argentina, and began her working life teaching children with Down's syndrome, before deciding she would have more power and autonomy as a psychiatrist. After completing her studies, she went to work at the Menninger Clinic in Kansas, where she was given a job in a medium-secure unit, working with seriously disturbed patients.

One of these was a woman, originally from a small island in the China Sea, who had killed her three children - and claimed it was because she was struggling to feed them. Photographs soon appeared in the newspapers showing her fridge, packed full of food. With the help of a translator, Welldon gradually uncovered her story. The woman had been expected to go into prostitution in her early teens, to support her family, had rebelled against this, and felt she'd made a more positive life for herself when she met, and married, a black American soldier. But on arriving in the US with him, she found herself ostracised, as a result of endemic racism. She eventually had a psychotic breakdown, turning her violence on her children.

i Estela Welldon's *Playing With Dynamite: A Personal Approach to the Psychoanalytic Understanding of Perversions, Violence and Criminality* is published by Karnac Books

This action accords with Welldon's understanding, discussed in her 1988 book, *Mother, Madonna, Whore*, that while men tend to project their violence and perversions outwards, on to other people, "in women it is usually against themselves, either against their bodies", expressed in eating disorders, for instance, "or against objects they see as their own creations: their babies". In *Playing with Dynamite*, this difference is illustrated partly with reference to exhibitionism, and specifically flashing. While male exhibitionists tend to compulsively expose themselves to people they don't know, "women suffer from this compulsion only with other women to whom they feel a close attachment", Welldon writes.

In the 1960s, she came to work in the UK, eventually securing a position at the Portman Clinic in London, which concentrated specifically on treating perverse, delinquent patients through psychoanalysis. There, in 1981, Welldon started a regular group-therapy session, which included both victims and perpetrators of violence. I balk at this idea, but she explains that the participants were chosen through an extensive interview process, obviously agreed to the setup, and that



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having this mix in the room allowed victims to confront the type of people who had hurt them, and perpetrators to witness the ongoing damage caused by their behaviour. Welldon says some of the incest perpetrators she treated "were not aware of causing any damage - or only physical damage. Then, in the group, they see these women who are in their 30s and still suffering, and they become aware."

Her mind still teems with former patients. She tells me the story of one woman who had been the victim of horrendous maternal and paternal incest, before being employed by the church. Once there, says Welldon, "she began to steal enormous amounts of money, and nobody ever recognised it was her. You can see the elements there - the church represented her mother, the priest her father, and she was acting against them in a symbolic manner. She got so upset about not being caught that she had to go and tell the authorities, and then she came to group therapy."

Also in the group was a man who had been perpetrating incest with his young stepdaughter, and a female patient in her 30s who had been a long-term victim of incest. "This woman was very nice, like all these victims, very compliant, very passive, and one day she said: 'You know, I wasn't able to watch the programme I wanted to see last night, because my father rang up and talked for the full hour.' And the man said: 'Are you crazy? Didn't you tell your father - look, I will talk to you in an hour's time? You are still allowing your father to fuck you.'

"The woman went 'Arrrrrrrrgh'. She went absolutely crazy. Another time, she came from a weekend away, and said: 'I had a terrible time, because I told my parents a long time ago that I have become a vegetarian, and my father cooked sausages and bacon for me and I had to eat it.' And this guy, again, said: 'Do you realise how much you are collaborating in that situation?' And she went: 'What?' And she began to be able to express enormous anger. Another time, she came and said: 'The fucking bastard got what he deserved.' Her father had got cancer of the testicles. And then it was up to me to tell her that in her expression of revenge she was still very much attached to him."

The group was open-ended, and this woman remained in it for 17 years, eventually going on to have a good, loving relationship. The other woman, who had been working at the church, "said she was too damaged to have a relationship, or children. She just wanted to be able to get therapy so she could go out into the world and work efficiently and honestly. She stayed for four or five years, and then said, that's it. I thought that was very insightful on her part."

Welldon still works with patients, and writes and lectures frequently. Forensic psychotherapy is underfunded, she says, but over the course of her career, awareness of the underlying reasons for criminal behaviour has increased. "If you look, for example, at the recent riots, there were a lot of articles saying that these were conveying something specific, so there's far more recognition that there are social problems, and that these are related to inequalities."

Was she ever able to cure people of their perversions? "Oh, yes," she says. A perversion "is a component of the personality, and it is possible to cure it, although not with everybody - no way! The prognosis is far more favourable with women than with men ... But the funny thing is - and I checked this with other colleagues - sometimes, when you feel almost at the point of despair, it's a turning point in the patient. So you can never be completely hopeless. Sometimes you could have spent 10 years working with someone, and just at the moment you are ready to say: 'OK, I cannot do any more here,' - she beams "something happens."