

## Regional

# Maätita studies issues of motherhood, sexuality

While motherhood and sexuality have obviously been linked throughout human history, the connection between the two emerge from time to time as hot issues of public opinion and fodder for political debate. Someone who studies the intersections of these issues is Florence Maätita, an associate professor in the department of sociology and criminal justice at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville.

"There have been some incredible shifts throughout most of American society with regard to motherhood and how women – and men for that matter – mother," said Maätita. "Especially in the 1960s there was this shift in how people understood sexual practices, awareness and identity. There was also in the midst of this great shift a movement of middle class white mothers with young children going into the paid labor force. How women, and also how men, experience and define motherhood has certainly been affected in large part by paid labor force participation."

Born in San Leandro, Calif., Maätita obtained her bachelor's degree in sociology from the University of California at Santa Barbara and her master's and doctoral degrees in sociology from the University of Connecticut. She said that she became interested in sociology as a college student.

"I grew up in Los Angeles, born to immigrants. When I went to college at Santa Barbara it was not diverse. It was very white, very affluent, so I struggled finding my place there. It was a new and terrifying world that I was experiencing," she said. "When you are 18 and away from mom and dad, you have so many questions about your political, gender, racial, ethnic identity. And I found that these were the types of questions that were being addressed in my sociology classes." These are now among the issues that engage her scholarship and teaching, particularly surrounding the concept of motherhood.

In the last few decades, she said, the image of the single mother, and even the single father, has evolved due to social and economic circumstances. The perception of the mother, she said, is much more diverse and less rigid in terms of role expectations. The same, she added, can be said about the changing perception of feminism, evolving from a white, suburban women stereotype to a much more diverse one, particularly from an ethnic viewpoint.

"If you look at the literature of what is called the third wave of the feminist movement, it tends to be more inclusive of not just ethnicity, but also immigration status, sexual orientation and social class," Maätita explained. "If you ever look at the Web site for the National Organization for Women, a lot of it is geared toward young college-age women, addressing their concerns regarding issues of their own ethnic and national identity." The association of these issues with sexuality, she added, has also evolved.

"Going back to the 1960s, with the rise of the gay rights movement, there has been this push to acknowledge sexuality as a primary identity for people, not just on a personal level but also in terms of greater social movements," Maätita said, who introduces these areas of study in her classes at SIUE.

"When I talk about marriage and family in the social inequality course that I teach, there is this great political tension between how we perceive this particular group of people," she said. "Is it a group of people who choose to be non-heterosexual? Or is it that people are born that way? And we consider the religious influence in what a lot of organized religions have to say about sexuality and sexual expression."

In addition to studying real people, she has also explored the sociology of fictional characters. Recently she published a chapter for a book on the sociology of Harry Potter.

"A couple of years ago, I got a call from



Dr. Maätita in of the classrooms where she teaches.

Photo courtesy of Sami Kampwerth

## Aldemaro Romero College Talk

someone who was putting together a collection of essays on Harry Potter from a sociological perspective," she said. Being a huge fan of the character, Maätita said she couldn't resist the opportunity.

"I started looking at some of the literature and applying it to what's going on in this magical world," she said. "In this particular piece, we focus on the notion of safe space, especially in terms of where Harry Potter feels safe, what he designates as a safe place and what the other characters designate as a safe place for him. We also look at some of the tensions that arise when a space that was originally designated as safe is no longer safe."

A new area of study for Maätita is male friendship and how it differs from friendship between women.

"We are really trying to catch up with men and masculinity," she said. "A friend of mine and I were talking about movies we had seen recently and we were really intrigued by the number of movies about men doing things together. There is a lot of literature that says that men are socialized to have certain types of emotions, such as aggression and anger and to not be very open with their feelings. But you have these movies where men are out there doing silly things and they are friends. One question to ask is just what these movies suggest about the nature of friendship between men."

*Aldemaro Romero is the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. His show, "Segue," can be heard every Sunday morning at 9 a.m. on WSIE, 88.7 FM. He can be reached at [College\\_Arts\\_Sciences@siue.edu](mailto:College_Arts_Sciences@siue.edu).*