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Study Finds TV Alters Fiji Girls' View of Body

By ERICA GOODE

"You've gained weight" is a traditional compliment in Fiji, anthropologists say.

In accordance with traditional culture in the South Pacific nation, dinner guests are expected to eat as much as possible. A robust, nicely rounded body is the norm for men and women. "Skinny legs" is a major insult. And "going thin," the Fijian term for losing a noticeable amount of weight, is considered a worrisome condition.

But all that may be changing, now that Heather Locklear has arrived.

Just a few years after the introduction of television to a province of Fiji's main island, Viti Levu, eating disorders -- once virtually unheard of there -- are on the rise among girls, according to a study presented yesterday at the American Psychiatric Association meetings in Washington. Young girls dream of looking not like their mothers and aunts, but like the slender stars of "Melrose Place" and "Beverly Hills 90210."

"I'm very heavy," one Fijian adolescent lamented during an interview with researchers led by Dr. Anne E. Becker, director of research at the Harvard Eating Disorders Center of Harvard Medical School, who investigated shifts in body image and eating practices in Fiji over a three-year period.

The Fijian girl said her friends also tell her that she is too fat, "and sometimes I'm depressed because I always want to lose weight."

Epidemiological studies have shown that eating disorders are more prevalent in industrialized countries, suggesting that cultural factors play a role. But few studies have examined the effects of long-term cultural shifts on disordered eating in traditional societies.

Dr. Becker and her colleagues surveyed 63 Fijian secondary school girls, whose average age was 17. The work began in 1995, one month after satellites began beaming television signals to the region. In 1998, the researchers surveyed another group of 65 girls from the same schools, who were matched in age, weight and other characteristics with the subjects in the earlier group.

Fifteen percent in the 1998 survey reported that they had induced vomiting to control their weight, the researchers said, compared with 3 percent in the 1995 survey. And 29 percent scored highly on a test of eating-disorder risk, compared with 13 percent three years before.

Girls who said they watched television three or more nights a week in the 1998 survey were 50 percent more likely to describe themselves as "too big or fat" and 30 percent more likely to diet than girls who watched television less frequently.

Before 1995, Dr. Becker said, there was little talk of dieting in Fiji. "The idea of calories was very foreign to them." But in the 1998 survey, 69 percent said that at some time they had been on a diet. In fact, preliminary data suggest more teen-age girls in Fiji diet than their American counterparts.

The results of the study have not been published, but were reviewed by the psychiatric association's scientific program committee before being accepted for presentation at the meetings.

Several of the students told Dr. Becker and her colleagues that they wanted to look like the Western women they saw on television shows like "Beverly Hills 90210." One girl said that her friends "change their mood, their hairstyles, so that they can be like those characters." "So in order to be like them, I have to work on myself, exercising and my eating habits should change," she said.

But Dr. Marshall Sahlins, Charles F. Grey professor emeritus of Anthropology at the University of Chicago, said that he doubts that television was the only factor in the changes. "I think that television is a kind of metaphor of something more profound," he said.

In contrast to the solitary couch-potato viewing style displayed by many Americans, watching television is a communal activity in Fiji, Dr. Becker said. Fijians often gather in households with television sets, and sit together, drinking kava and talking about their day's activities, the TV on in the background.

"What we noticed in 1995 is that people had a sort of curiosity, but it was a dismissive curiosity," Dr. Becker said. "But over the years they have come to accept it as a form of entertainment."

Fiji residents have access to only one television channel, she said, which broadcasts a selection of programs from the United States, Britain and Australia. Among the most popular are "Seinfeld," "Melrose Place," which features Ms. Locklear, "E.R.," "Xena, Warrior Princess," and "Beverly Hills 90210."

Dr. Becker said that the increase in eating disorders like bulimia may be a signal that the culture is changing so quickly that Fijians are having difficulty keeping up. Island teen-agers, she said, "are acutely aware that the traditional culture doesn't equip them well to negotiate the kinds of conflicts" presented by a 1990's global economy.

In other Pacific societies, Dr. Becker said, similar cultural shifts have been accompanied by an increase in psychological problems among adolescents. Researchers speculated, for example, that rapid social change played a role in a rash of adolescent suicides in Micronesia in the 1980's.
