Study Abroad claims that a discrepancy between real and ideal selves lies at the root of culture stress. The ideal self is a mental model of the self that the learner constructs in response to feedback from his or her environment. When the learner goes abroad, he or she receives completely new feedback from the environment, and so encounters a real self that is considerably different from the ideal self that was effectively left behind in the home culture. Thus a conflict or discrepancy arises between the ideal and real selves. The language learner’s ability to both deal with this discrepancy and to reconstitute the self so as to bring the real and the ideal back together, is seen throughout the book as being key to successful language and culture learning.

Indeed, Aveni proposes that communicative competence involves “self-presentational” competence in addition to grammatical and sociolinguistic competence, that is, the ability to present the self fully and comfortably (145-146). This involves not just learning to use behaviors and speech that relates the desired self to the host culture (C2) in such a way that C2 members respond in a manner that is congruent to that self, but also extending one’s self-concept in the first place so as to make it possible to be understood and accepted in C2.

Aveni takes her data from observation of students studying Russian abroad over two semesters in the 1995–1996 school year. She did classroom observation and informal observation; ethnographic and directed interviews; week-long narrative journal (NJ) “rounds” written by subjects at various points in the study program; weekly journal notebooks kept by some who enjoyed doing the NJs; oral proficiency interviews (OPIs); a “qualifying grammar test”; and from entry and exit questionnaires. There were a total of 76 students in the study, of whom 9 spent a full academic year and the rest a semester. The data gathered was extensive: the author describes it as comprising thousands of pages and hundreds of taped interview hours. Aveni focuses on a subset of the 76 students, what she calls 6 “primary” and 11 “supporting” individuals. An overview of each of these individuals is found in an appendix, and the reader can trace references to them via the index. Primary individuals got 15–25 mentions in the book, supporting individuals 5–10.
Here is a bit of an interview transcription done with “Beth.” It illustrates a loss of self-image after her privacy is invaded in the bathroom:

I’m so much cooler in English. I would’ve been like, “Oh! No big whoop!” Or, you know, said something funny, or like, madder her see, like, I could give a flying crap. But my silence, my immobilization, just must have given just a totally different impression that it did, like, affect me, or something like that…It’s not the same “Beth-ism,” you know? They won’t understand how, like…or like, I couldn’t joke, like I’m a stranger, like I would have joked around with him afterwards…or something like that…I’m not myself [here]! I’m not the per-, I think, I okay, I know I’m a pain in the ass, but I think I’m a really cool person when it comes down to it. I think I do have a good personality, and it’s so frustrating being, like, so vacuous! [laughs]…I can’t be sassy in the language! A little sassy, but not, like, as sassy as I want to be! And, and the sassiness empowers me, and says, Hey! You’re not gonna’, you know, you’re not gonna’ screw me over, or you’re not gonna’…Like I think if you knew how sassy I was, um, how, maybe intelligent I was, or maybe, mmm, how confident I am normally, I wouldn’t be treated this way. Because, it just wouldn’t happen because the respect, I don’t think I have it, and the respect is so, so important to me. But there’s no way! I never can get it if I can’t communicate, so it’s difficult, it really is… (17)

Such vivid examples of student experiences of Russian culture are the bread and butter of the book. This should make it appealing to teachers seeking an equivalent to the reality programming that contemporary students see all the time on television, that is, illustrations from real life.

The book is organized into sections that resemble certain presentation topics found in a Language and Culture Learning (LACL) course. Excluding the introductory and concluding chapters, there are seven substantial sections in the book. These sections are about: the construction of self with regard to (1) social hierarchy and (2) social distance; factors affecting self-construction with regard to (3) social-environmental and (4) learner-internal factors, and (5) how these cues interact; (6) how learners progress in self-assurance while learning to cope with threatening social and environmental circumstances; and (7) how the real and ideal selves converge as learners progress.

*Study Abroad* uses Grounded Theory Methodology (GTM—Strauss and Corbin 1990). Aveni claims that GTM has not been frequently employed in second language acquisition (SLA) studies, so that she hopes that her study will “open doors” to reexamining SLA from this sort of perspective. GTM itself is an inductive approach employed in social sciences whereby the researcher gathers a variety of data and attempts to draw qualitative hypotheses from that data without *a priori* bringing any particular framework to the research that is closely related to the social situation under investigation. In this case, Aveni begins with a developmental psychology framework, which postulates that:

[C]hildren view models of successful individuals and aspire to make themselves like them, thus developing a concept of their ideal self. Through the maturational process, these children then strive to construct a real self that most closely approximates their ideal. Self-esteem can be reduced in social interaction when there is “an increase in the
discrepancy between ideal and real self, a decrement in one or more of the individual’s power bases, and a loss of effectiveness in gaining interpersonal objectives. (15, citing Tedeschi 1990:321)

Aveni reports that of the 76 students, some had home stays and some stayed in dormitories. However for the focus individuals mentioned in the appendix, only one was mentioned as staying in a dormitory. All of the primary individuals resided in Russian homes. It would have been interesting to see results for more of the students who lived in a dormitory. I suspect that such students did not perform as well nor mature as much as the home stayers, but confirmation of that would have been nice to see.

Following are what seem to be novel concepts emerging from the book vis-à-vis teaching language and culture learning. First, the central premise of the book may be worthy of introduction to this course, namely, that we construct ideal selves in our home cultures, but encounter real selves in host cultures, and that the gap between the real and ideal becomes the basis for culture stress. The dynamics of realigning the real and ideal selves are also germane to how internal and external factors in language learning are taught. Learners are most influenced initially by external factors in their learning environment; over time as they gain confidence, internal factors dominate how efficiently they learn. This is a nice piece of rationale for using Greg Thomson’s (1993) concept of creating a secure nest for oneself early on in a LACL program: one does not want to feel overly threatened or challenged early on in a language learning program. Later on, self-confidence in learning and using the language gains the upper hand, and the learner is able to take on a more challenging environment and still thrive.

Another interesting point about the book, found in the appendices describing key research participants in detail is that they did not always make progress between OPVs (given before and after the semester(s) abroad), yet the researcher still observed such people making progress in confidence and proficiency in using what language they had. I think this is evidence for the relevancy of a form of communicative competence that OPI cannot measure, and that is the self-presentational competency mentioned above. For example, “Despite Jim’s apparent L2 use, the OPI failed to register change in his oral proficiency (pre- and post-semester OPI scores of 1). However, as with other apparent episodes of “non-gain,” this speaks more to the insensitivity of the OPI as a research tool for qualitative proficiency change than to any failure on Jim’s part (163).” (Aveni does add a footnote that the OPI is being reevaluated to be more sensitive to intercultural, sociolinguistic, and discourse competencies.)

The book is informative and useful for teaching LACL. It is loaded with journal entries and interview transcripts organized within topics that are commonly taught within the course. One participant’s experience may prove to be particularly useful in the LACL classroom. An African-American student named “Madeline” encountered overt racism in Russian culture. References to her case may be helpful for students in realizing that American multiculturalism is not a value shared universally, and African-American students in particular will find the Madeline study interesting.

Aveni is my first exposure to GTM-based observation. The book is well-organized, with appendices and index. It was satisfying to see the theory she developed accord well with what is
already taught in LACL courses. I also wonder if GTM could form the basis for consultant research within SIL.

References

