Cross Cultural Differences

Released in the United States in 2006, “Outsourced” is a romantic comedy directed by John Jeffcoat which showcases the journey of a Seattle call center manager named Todd Anderson whose job, along with the rest of his department at Western Novelty, is outsourced to India. He is unwillingly dispatched to a call center in India where he is supposed to train his replacement, Puro, and the rest of the staff there to lower their MPI to under 6 minutes. Having no prior exposure to the Indian culture, he encounters difficulties in language, food, and environment during his stay. Todd meets an American businessman in Bombay who tells him is impossible to get the MPI lower than an 8 in India. The man recalls resisting India as Todd did, but said that once he “gave in”, he did much better. Though Todd was initially perplexed by the foreign surroundings, he was subsequently disarmed by Puro’s cordiality and enticed by his co-worker Asha's offer to enlighten the novice as to the India’s unique culture. To Todd, she was the gateway to understanding India and its people, to help him help the Indian workers understand the American customers. Although Todd was sent to India to teach, he ends up being the one with the most to learn. He realizes that he must learn about the people there and be more accepting, so that can be a better manager. Todd and Asha end up catching feelings for each other in the process. However, their relationship ultimately falls apart as the realities of India’s arranged marriages and America’s greed for profit conspire against them.

The film revolves around Todd’s whimsical experience in India and takes viewers through the clash of Indian and American cultures, the unexpected relationships that develop, and the process of Todd learning to adjust and respect a culture so vastly different from his own. In my report I will be analyzing cross-cultural differences, cultural adjustment, and the importance of cross-cultural competence exemplified in this film, encompassing four cross-cultural concepts from Hofstede framework.

Cross-cultural Differences and Adjustments

From the moment Todd sets foot in India, he experienced physical and mental culture shock as there was a sense of bewilderment when he was first exposed to a different cultural environment. Upon arriving at the airport, he was met with an overwhelming crowd of locals which he had to navigate through. He was then mobbed by a group of Indian taxi drivers yelling over each other in their native tongue. In attempt to escape, Todd approached the nearest “taxi”, but found himself chasing after his suitcase in what he called “one of those taxi go-cart thingies.” I had a similar experience regarding transportation during my trip to Bangkok, where I was overcharged for a taxi ride from Suvarnabhumi Airport. Though required by law for taxi drivers to use the meter, it is not uncommon of drivers to charge a fixed fare which can cost up to triple the cost of using a meter. Like Todd, I lacked cultural awareness as a foreigner, and this led me to assume an acceptable fare had already been settled. Tourists tend to be naive, and I was reluctant to speak up so as to not offend or appear ignorant to the cultural difference.

Many of the main cultural differences seen in this film are embodied specifically by the differences in language, environment, and food.

The language differences throughout the film contributed to Todd’s difficulty to adapt to the new

environment, starting with names. Everyone Todd met addressed him as “Mr. Toad” due to their thick Indian accent. Hence Todd’s name was misspelled as “Mr. Toad” at the airport, which led him to the take the “taxis” instead of his designated private car. Likewise, Todd was guilty of mispronunciations, replying “holy what?” when Puro shared about the Indian Holi festival. During the culture classes Todd gave to the Indian workers, he insisted on them concealing their Indian accents and learning American slang although all them were in fact native English speakers. There also were several differences in terminology between the two countries which caused some misunderstanding, such as the fact that rubbers do not mean erasers in America and therefore should not be endorsed to students.

In terms on environment, Todd encountered new definitions of the acceptable from a man urinating by the side of the road, to when he is forced to literally “hop” onto a moving train to get to his next destination. He was offered a seat on the train by a young boy, but was alarmed when the boy proceeded to sit on his lap. An obvious cultural difference can be observed here as an act of kindness in one culture can be perceived as unusual in another. Unlike Todd's Seattle office, the office in India was a small ramshackle building, which was also housed a cow, much to Todd’s horror.

In the realm of food, Todd physically displayed his unfamiliarity with the Indian culture when he ate an Indian snack called ice gola from a street vendor, and subsequently suffered from dyspepsia. Furthermore, Todd made the cultural faux pas of eating with his left hand when offered snacks at the guest house. In India the left hand is considered the “dirty hand”, used to wipe one’s bottom among other unsavory functions. Meanwhile the right hand is considered the “clean hand”, used for eating and so on. Not soon after arriving, Todd felt homesick and bought a cheeseburger from what he thought was to a “McDonald’s”, only to find out that the restaurant only sold vegetarian burgers.

Despite all these differences, Todd makes an effort to accept and adapt to the Indian culture. He experiences a breakthrough when he unintentionally takes part in the Holi holiday in which Indians toss colored dye at each other. He initially tries to avoid people aiming at him, but eventually participates in the celebration with Puro. With his white work shirt now stained rainbow, he submerges himself into the village lake that he once thought was filthy, and floats amidst the other villagers. At this moment, Todd’s angst was washed clean by the river water, and he emerged with a newfound appreciation for the Indian culture. He physically integrated into his environment through this festival and felt at ease for the first time since moving to India. This epiphany improved his outlook on his situation, and his attitude towards working with the Indians. He promoted Asha to assistant manager and implemented suggestions to improve the work environment such as the personalization of the workspace. Moreover, he grew fond of the mischievous boy who stole his phone.

During Todd’s adjustment period, he learned to be more respectful of the Indian culture. This can be seen in the way he participated in an Indian dance with his workers during a culture class, accepted that his co-workers kept a cow in office, and ate Indian mango on the streets with Asha. He also shared a meal with a disadvantaged family from across the wall. In my opinion, this reflects Todd actively taking steps to understand, connect with, and adapt to his environment.

Power Distance

Todd’s boss, Dave, initially tried to convince Todd to go to India by stating “you like spicy food”. Todd was indignant at the suggestion, and disagreed with him by saying “I’m not going to India”. After some discussion, Todd received an ultimatum to choose between relocating to India and quitting his job, and although he was reluctant to leave, he eventually complied and made his way to Bombay.

The dimension of culture observed here is power distance (PDI) which expresses a society’s attitude towards the fact that there are physical and intellectual inequalities among people. India has a high PDI of 77, while to the US has a low PDI of 40. In low PDI cultures, everyone is entitled to have their say and be listened to regardless of rank or background as relationship between bosses and their subordinates is one of interdependence. This is exemplified in the informal interaction between Todd and his boss where Todd, as the subordinate, readily contradicts his boss, who he is on a first-name basis with. Todd also displays low PDI characteristics in a scene where he uses derogatory terms such as “corporate slime-ball” and “cheap bastard” to refer to his boss. This greatly contradicts the behavior of those in high PDI cultures like India where everyone referred to Todd respectfully as “Mr. Todd”, “Boss”, or “Sir”. This is because in a high PDI cultures, there is an appreciation for hierarchy and a high dependence of workers on managers. There is a large emotional distance between members, and employees expect to be explicitly told what is expected of them. Subordinates will rarely approach their bosses with critiques or criticism.

Having experienced school life in both local and international schools, I felt a prominent difference between Singapore’s high PDI culture (74) and the UK’s low PDI culture (35). Majority of the teachers at my international school came from the UK, a low PDI country. One noticeable difference between my schooling experiences was the communication between teachers and students. In local school, students are expected to stand up and bow to teachers at the start and end of each class, or if they cross paths in the hallway. However in international schools, students often remain seated when a teacher enters, and would merely flash a smile of acknowledgment if a teacher they recognized walked past them. Furthermore, I noticed that the students and teachers in international schools have a more casual relationship compared to in local school, and would often engage in small talk and banter during breaks. I remember instances where my teacher would come up to my friends and I and ask us what we did over the weekend. In my opinion, a direct result of having a lower power distance between teachers and students can be seen by an increase in confidence in students to proactively ask questions and interact with teachers during class. In comparison, in local schools, many students were afraid of raising their hand to ask questions out of shyness or the fear of being reprimanded by strict teachers for not knowing their work.

Individualism Vs Collectivism

The second dimensions of culture that can be noted is Individualism vs collectivism (IDV) which focuses on the importance of individual interests versus group interests. India has a low score of 48 and are generally more collectivist, while the US is one of the most individualistic countries in the world with a high score of 91. In collectivist cultures like India, there is an inclination towards belonging to a larger social framework where individuals act to the benefit their in-groups. Individuals in these in-groups are unquestionably loyal and supportive of one another. Conversely, individualistic cultures like the US, there are weak interpersonal connections among those outside their immediate family and friends. People take less responsibility for others’

actions, make their own decisions and develop their own identity. They are also unafraid to defy the majority and express personal opinions.

Examples of the difference between these cultures can be seen from the fact that the managers of Todd’s company couldn’t care less about the loss of jobs in both America and India, but were only concerned with the call centers hiring the cheapest labor at “8 heads for the price of one' to lower their costs. Todd also told Puro that he lives alone in apartment in Seattle, and that he does not visit his parents although they live just 2 hours away. This surprised Puro as those in low IDV cultures undoubtedly maintain close relationships with their families, and in India it the norm for a married couple to stay with one’s parents. During the commute to Todd’s hotel, Puro displayed collectivist characteristics when he expressed concern about Todd’s unwell appearance after eating the ice gola. He insisted on taking Todd to Auntie Ji’s guesthouse instead so he would not be lonely. He claimed that she would be able to take care of Todd “better than your own real mother” and was the “most excellent Indian cook”. Furthermore, Auntie Ji was eager to know more about Todd by asking him personal questions like “are you married?” within minutes of meeting him. She treated him like family and played a motherly role by ironing his underwear for him. Another area which reflected the collectivist nature of the Indian culture was when Todd observed the maid keeping passing leftover food over the wall to the disadvantage families living on the other side.

Masculinity vs Femininity

One cultural similarity America and India share is that they are both masculine cultures. The USA has a MAS score of 62, and India follows closely behind at 56. Masculinity vs femininity (MAS) refers to the distribution of roles between men and women, and the extent to which a society emphasizes traditional gender roles. In masculine societies (high MAS score), the roles of men and women overlap less. Men are expected to behave assertively by placing great importance on material earnings, job recognition, power and success. Meanwhile women are expected to be modest, tender, with a focus on the quality of life. Contrarily, in feminine societies (low MAS score), there is a greater overlap between male and female roles. Modesty is perceived as a virtue by both men and women. They display emotions more openly it is important for members to cooperate well with one another rather than have conflict and competition. Although both India and America are masculine cultures, India is less flexible when it comes to traditional family structure. While American women are encouraged to go to school and to get a job, Indian women are not usually allowed work or attend school because they are expected to be housewives. This is examplified in a scene where Asha confided in Todd about her struggle within the Indian culture to get an education. She defied the wishes of her parents and went to college and worked for the call center. Conversely, Todd displayed feminine characteristics when he promoted Asha to assistant manager for her hard work despite her gender.

Long-term VS Short-term Orientation

This dimention refers to a society’s connection with their past, and their attitude towards dealing with present and future challenges. Short-term oriented societies like the USA with a low score of 26 focus more on the present or past, and place significance on immediate gratification. This is seen when Todd’s company chose to outsource the call center to India where the labor was cheaper without considering the long-term effects of their decision. They

later revised their plans and asked Todd to go to China to train another yet another manager. Furthermore, Todd was solely interested in getting the center's MPI down to 6 minutes so he could pack up and head home quickly. This shows that the objectives of the Americans revolved around achieving short-term goals and moving to the next one as soon as possible.

On the other hand, long-term oriented societies are more modest and pragmatic. They prioritize the future and are willing to setback short-term success or emotional gratification in anticipation of a better future. India is a more long-term oriented society with a moderate score of 51. In India it is more important to form strong, long-lasting bonds with others that rather than sealing the deal and fleeing. Moreover, families come first and they rely heavily on tradition. Asha explained to Todd that she had been engaged to someone since the age of 4 and would be marrying him since she was arranged to, rather than for love. Their families had known each other for generations, and she strongly believes she will learn to love him after marriage, just as her parents did. Asha's situation illustrates the long-term orientation of the Indian culture. Similarly, the title "Future Call Center Manager" written on Puro's business card served as motivation for him to work hard to achieve his long-term goal of becoming the manager and getting married to his love, and this reinforces the fixation on long term achievements.

Conclusion and Recommendations

By the end of the film, Todd had transformed into a completely different man. After the trials and tribulations of learning to adapt to a new cultural environment, and with the help of his acquaintances Asha and Puro, Todd was no longer reluctant to accept the Indian culture. In fact, he brought certain Indian-influenced behaviors back to America with him. When he touched down, he phoned his parents immediately as he had learned the importance of family while he was away. He also habitually added excessive amounts of sugar into his coffee to imitate the taste of the coffee he drank in India. Nonetheless, I think that if Todd had sufficiently prepared for the trip, he would have had an easier time adapting to his new environment, and would have achieved his goal MPI faster. My recommendation is for him to research about India's customs and behaviors or take a culture training course to equip him with the cultural awareness necessary to tackle the prevailing issues. He should strive to learn as much as possible about their culture so as to not interpret their behaviors through the lens of his own culture.

In conclusion, I think a lot can be learned about cross-cultural competence from Todd's struggle. After watching and analyzing this film, I now recognize the importance of learning to accept and adapt to the differences of each unique culture. With globalization, cultural diversity is of utmost importance because our working environments are increasingly multicultural. This leads to a higher chance of miscommunication, for which we must proactively prevent by learning about other cultures. We must understand that their perspectives and decision making may be different from our own, so as to dispel any stereotypes and biases. Furthermore, cultural diversity makes our world a more interesting place to live in as people from different walks of life and cultures come together and share new knowledge and experiences.