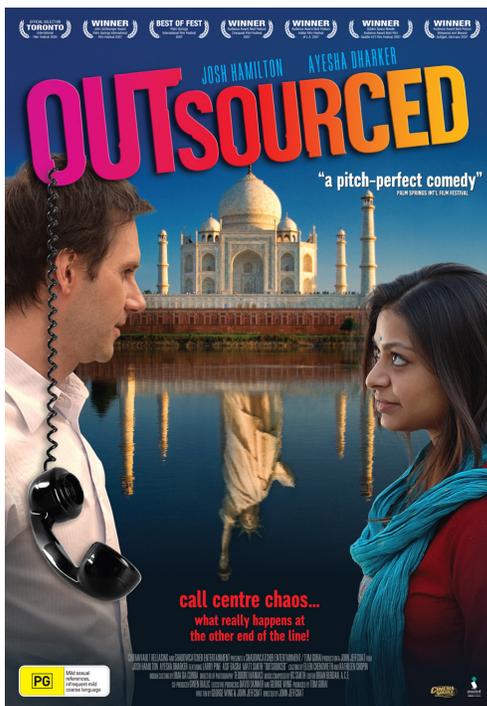


Growing up thinking our way is the "the way", "the way", or the "superior way" is the root of cultural misunderstandings and ethnocentrism. Exposing children to different cultures and different places helps them to understand that there are different perspectives and ways to achieve a goal. They grow up with an open mentality and a higher threshold of tolerance when it comes to intercultural engaging.

Our maniacal compulsive desire to label everything, creating groups that separate us from them, also contributes to the ethnocentric phenomena. We have decided that there are third-world countries, undeveloped nations, and aboriginal people. Those who do not belong to those silos are considered superior and they believe on the mighty of their ethnicity; some feel the need to "educate" the "ignorant" without even questioning the assumption of their higher status.

In my opinion, Americans have been victims of their educational system - elementary through high school. The fact that there is no interest in teaching world geography or history made them grew on an incubator where their ethnocentrism was cultivated for years, and when they are ready to engage with the world they are perceived as imperialists with a "conquistador" attitude. I will never forget a huge newspaper article's headline on September 11, 2001 that read: "Why do they hate us?" my immediate response was "because of your cultural ignorance and cocky attitude."

I am in no way saying that the terrorist attacks were justified nor appropriate, but I think Americans have a hard time grasping what cultural-sensitivity is. From business to politics, and even charity, the approach is always the same "we know" and "you will learn."



"Outsourced" is a film that perfectly depicts this dynamic. Todd arrived to India with the mission of "teaching them how to provide customer service to America." His American business-driven mentality focused on lowering the time of each call. He tried to teach them how to "sound" more American to please its market; he even suggested them to lie about their location, forgetting about their cultural values.

The moment where his ethnocentrism was more evident was when he told them that they needed to learn how to speak English and Asha responded that English was the official language of India.

His ignorance about India was even more evident when he was explaining how calves were marked with incandescent branding irons. The first thing he saw when he got to the office was a cow and he didn't care to ask why a cow was there. Asha suggested that he needed to learn more about India and a stranger he met at "McDonells" also told him that his life was going to change when he embrace India.

One of the interesting scenes, that showed the dynamic between a high context and low context cultures, was when Todd was upset because the soundproof glass was not installed yet and the Manager said, "No problem Mr. Todd," and Todd said "Do not say no problem when there is a problem."

I could totally relate to Todd on my last intercultural experience. I work for a civil engineering firm; part of my job is to contact other engineering firms to join our team to pursue a business opportunity. Those solicitations are time-sensitive and I need to make sure to get their consent as soon as possible. One particular engineer, Indian, would not respond to my e-mail nor phone messages. I tried several times. When he finally responded to my e-mail, he sent the requested documents, but there was some missing information. When I finally was able to get him on the phone and asked for the information, he gave it to me, but then he started saying things like his company had reservations about him joining our team. So, I ask the question directly "Are you saying that you cannot join our team?" and he would respond with evasive statements. I asked the same question several times and he never said that he couldn't join our team. He only said, "There is no problem if your team does not include me," to which I responded, "There is a problem. I have little time to find a replacement for you. If you have said this the minute I contacted you, I would have had plenty of time to look for another engineer." Yes, I lost my temper.

Later that same day, I learned in class that people from India had an extremely hard time saying no. Now I know.

Since we are becoming a global village, I hope the education system changes and focus not only on the technological advances but also the cultural education needs of children. They are already born with the ability to handle technology; they need more guidance on how to engage with others, especially if they live thousands of miles away.