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Functional Turnover: An Empirical Assessment

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20. Abstract (continue)

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suggest that the traditional dichotomy may, in fact, substantially overstate the impact of voluntary turnover.

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It would appear that the impact of employee turnover on the organization could hardly be overstated. The cost of replacing a single nonmanagerial employee has been estimated at over \$2500 (Mirvis & Lawler, 1977). Not surprisingly, a large effort has been dedicated to the investigation of the turnover phenomenon; it has been estimated that over 1000 studies and articles have appeared in print on this subject (Muchinsky & Morrow, 1980; Steers & Mowday, in press). These works have a common thread--turnover is a costly organizational problem and should be reduced (Staw, in press).

Recent work, however, has questioned the fundamental assumption that turnover is invariably dysfunctional to the organization (Dalton & Todor, 1979; Dalton & Todor, in press (a), (b); Jeswald, 1974; Muchinsky & Tuttle, 1979; Muchinsky & Morrow, 1980; Staw, in press; Staw & Oldham, 1978). Dalton (1981) has suggested that levels of turnover, whether viewed positively or negatively, are overstated. Inappropriate measurement and reporting practices may be factors which lead to a systematic overstatement of the impact of turnover on the organization.

Turnover Recategorized

Comparing the categories in Tables 1 and 2 illustrates a fundamental difference between the traditional model of turnover and a model which identifies. "functional" turnover (Functional turnover is beneficial to the the organization). Notice that in both tables, cells "A" and "B" are identical. It is in the classification of "voluntary" turnover that the essential difference lies. In the traditional taxonomy (Figure 1), the organization's evaluation of the departing employee is ignored. In the expanded taxonomy (Figure 2), however, the evaluation of the employee is crucial. The expanded taxonomy (cells "C" and "D" of Table 2) includes two different kinds of "voluntary" turnover (Dalton, Todor & Krackhardt, in press).

<u>Dysfunctional</u> (cell C) - The individual wants to leave the organization but the organization prefers to retain the individual. This, of course, represents dysfunctional turn-over; and,

Functional (cell D) - The individual wants to leave the organization, but the organization is unconcerned. The organization has a negative evaluation of the individual. This represents functional turnover-turnover decidedly beneficial to the organization.

Clearly, the effects of these employee separations on the organization would be quite different. The fundamental point is that to combine the cases in the lower cells of Table 2 would have the effect of overstating the gravity of turnover on the organization. The benefits of functional turnover are disregarded. Of course, functional turnover is not without its costs to the organization. Recruitment, training, and a portion of the administrative overhead still must be defrayed. Even so, functional turnover may be, in the balance, a positive phenomenon for the organization. Consequently, an important objective is to separate dysfunctional from functional turnover.

Another Concern: Unavoidable vs. Controllable Turnvoer

Recent reviews suggest that turnover research has been aimed primarily towards identifying the antecedents of voluntary turnover (Porter & Steers, 1973; Price, 1977; Muchinsky & Tuttle, 1979; Mobley, Griffeth, Hand & Meglino, 1979). Presumably, such an identification may provide a means to reduce the incidence of turnover. However, if voluntary turnover is to be reduced, it must be under organizational control. Price (1977) persuasively argued that a primary reason for the reliance on voluntary turnover as a dependent variable is that it is more subject to

organizational control. Presumably, attempts to reduce any portion of voluntary turnover *not* subject to organizational control would be counter productive.

With respect to the expanded taxonomy (Figure 2), only cell C represents dysfunctional turnover. However, the total number of employees categorized in cell C does not necessarily represent turnover over which the organization has control. Employees who leave for education, family commitments, and health matters, for example, are not ordinarily subject to such control. If an aim of the organization is to reduce turnover, then the inclusion of such separations in its turnover reporting is misleading. For the theorist, this problem may provide a rationale for the relatively low associations between turnover and its suspected correlates. It may be that when using "voluntary" turnover as a dependent variable, we do not have a homogeneous subset.

Objectives

This research, then, addresses two questions with respect to voluntary turnover:

> Is the functional portion of voluntary turnover sufficiently large to warrant separate identification?

and

2) What portion of dysfunctional turnover is essentially unavoidable?

METHOD

Termination records were collected on bank tellers (N=1389) at 190 bank branches for a seven month period. The immediate supervisor of each departing employee was required by the bank to complete termination forms

from which it was determined whether the employee left voluntarily or was dismissed. In addition, the supervisor was asked to fill out a form on each teller which included the following items:

- 1. Would you rehire this person to work for you?
 - a. I would definitely hire this person to work for me again.
 - b. I would slightly prefer to hire this person (rather than someone else) to work for me again.
 - c. I am indifferent as to whether this person ever works for me again.
 - d. I would prefer to hire someone else to work for me.
 - e. Under no circumstances would I hire this person to work for me again.
- 2. How would you rate this person's performance as a teller while he or she was working for you?
 - a. Inadequate; clearly failed to meet minimum job requirements.
 - b. Generally adequate; met most job requirements; however, required close supervision.
 - c. Competent; met all requirements; required only minimal supervision.
 - d. High quality work; exceeded most requirements; made a valuable contribution and showed initiative.
 - e. Exceptional; consistently demonstrated outstanding performance.
- 3. In general, how easy would it be to find someone who would do as good a job as this person did?
 - a. Very easy
 - b. Somewhat easy
 - c. Somewhat difficult
 - d. Very difficult

This information was then collapsed into two dichotomous metrics to

represent the organization's evaluation of the departing employee (Dalton,

et. al., in press):

Quality of Employee. If the supervisor indicated that s/he would prefer to hire someone else (responses "d" or "e") in question 1; OR if the supervisor rated the employee as "inadequate" on question 2, then the employee was considered low quality. Otherwise, the employee was considered acceptable or high quality.

Replaceability of Employee. If the supervisor indicated that an employee would be at least "somewhat easy" to replace (question 3, "a" or "b"), then the employee was considered easily replaced. Any other responses were interpreted to mean that the employee would be "difficult" to replace. Employees were then placed into one of the four cells suggested by Tables 2 and 3. Inasmuch as there were two independent evaluative measures ("quality" and "replaceability" of employee), separate frequency tables were formed each representing a different concept of employee evaluation. Also, individual separation forms were examined to identify the reason for the voluntary terminations (e.g., retirement, health, family commitment, job adandonment) to determine which separations were under organizational control.

RESULTS

Extent of Functional Turnover

Table 1 represents the traditional categorization separating involuntary from voluntary turnover. Focusing on voluntary turnover as the "problem," the organization was experiencing a 32% turnover rate. This is a high percentage. The concern for such a turnover rate was, in fact, the primary reason that the sample organization granted permission for this research effort.

By dividing the "quit" category into dysfunctional and functional components, the turnover rate is greatly reduced. As indicated in Table 2, the proportion of turnover that involved valuable or at least acceptable employees is reduced to only 18%. If employees are evaluated by replaceability (Table 3), an arguably more relevant criterion, the dysfunctional turnover figure is less than 9%.

There are two points which should be noted. First, 9% or 18% turnover rates are not trivial; depending on the circumstances, such a rate could be disastrous. We would argue, however, that, *coteris paribus*, both 9% and 18% turnover rates are of less concern than the original 32%. Second, 42% of the voluntary turnover was actually *beneficial* to the organization by the "guality" standard; 185 people voluntarily left over the

period who were not recommended for rehire and/or were evaluated as inadequate (clearly failed to meet minimum job requirements). These "quits" represent functional turnover for the organization. By the "replaceability" standard, the results are somewhat more impressive: 314 employees (71% of the total voluntary turnover) left the organization over the test period who were evaluated as "easy to replace."

Unavoidable Turnover and Organizational Control

It has been suggested that organizational resources commited to reduce unavoidable turnover is money unwisely spent. Table 4 illustrates the extent to which this aspect of control confuses the reporting of organizational turnover.

(Insert Table 4 About Here)

As indicated in Table 4, there are substantial portions of both dysfunctional and functional turnover which are essentially unavoidable. Importantly, the unavoidable categories (i.e., temporary, summer, education, health, family commitment, personal, job abandonment) are provided by the management of the sample organization. Simply, no reasonable intervention would have prevented these separations.

In the case of functional turnover, these unavoidable separations are of little consequence. Frankly, it can be argued that it really does not matter why these individuals left; they are not valued by the organization in any case. With dysfunctional turnover, however, the unavoidable category is of marked importance. If an essential thrust of turnover research involves its reduction, the unavoidable category should be identified. This is particularly true if, as in this case, unavoidable separations amount to 45% or 52% ("quality" or "replaceability") of total dysfunctional turnover.

The "avoidable/controllable" turnover dichotomy should be viewed with some caution. There is no particular reason to believe that employees accurately report their reasons for leaving. Certainly, in some cases it would be easier for employees to say that they were leaving to return to school, for example, when in fact they simply do not like the job. Also, employees may not wish to "burn their bridges" behind them. Obviously, "reasons for leaving" stated without care may result in a recommendation not to rehire. While the "avoidable" category seems large, it may be somewhat overstated.

DISCUSSION

The invariably negative implications of turnover on the organization have recently been criticized (Dalton & Todor, 1979; Dalton & Todor. in press (a), (b); Muchinsky & Tuttle, 1979; Muchinsky & Morrow, in press; Staw, in press; Staw & Oldham, 1978). Whether a more positive or the traditional view of turnover is taken may be largely function of its measurement. The usual "voluntary/involuntary" dichotomization of turnover may be necessary, but insufficient, to evaluate turnover in its proper perspective. Perhaps by recognizing that turnover may be subject to dysfunctional and functional categorizations and appreciating that certain turnover is, for practical purposes, unavoidable, a more responsible estimate of the impact of turnover on the organization may be determined.

As indicated in the Table 5 compendium, whether relying on a "quality" or "replaceability" criterion, the amount of functional turnover is substantive. This summarization also suggests that the avoidable/controllable dichotomy is a meaningful one. Approximately half of the cases of dysfunctional turnover by either criterion were not avoidable; i.e.

no reasonable intervention by the organization would have prevented the employee separations.

(Insert Table 5 About Here)

The shaded portions of Table 5 represent dysfunctional turnover which is potentially controllable by the organization. These sections identify personnel who the organization prefers to retain. Also, organizational intervention may actually reduce the incidence of this turnover. Compare the amounts of controllable, dysfunctional turnover with the total voluntary turnover: 31.7% vs 10.0% by "quality"; 31.7% vs 4.3% by "replaceability." That may be testimony for overstatement, or at least misunderstanding, of the "voluntary" category.

The contributions of the expanded taxonomy are threefold. First, categorizing voluntary turnover in the manner endorsed by this research may lead to a more realistic portrayal of the impact of turnover on the organization. A program to reduce turnover may be actually shortsighted for organizations with relatively large portions of functional and/or unavoidable turnover. Arguably, functional turnover should not be reduced. Moreover, to commit organizational resources to reduce turnover which is essentially unavoidable is futile.

Second, as previously noted, the expanded taxonomy may provide a partial explanation for the ordinarily low associations between voluntary turnover and its suspected antecedents and determinants. Perhaps the correlates of functional and dysfunctional turnover are not the same; the "voluntary" categorization may not be homogeneous. This is especially bothersome inasmuch as Price (1977) noted that one of the primary reasons that researchers have relied on the voluntary/involuntary dichotomy is to assure homogeneity.

Lastly, individuals categorized as functional or dysfunctional separations may be predictably different from one another. They may, for example, respond to different types of intervention. To the extent that these individuals are dissimilar, organizations may be able to minimize dysfunctional without artificially suppressing functional turnover.

We can agree with Porter and Steers (1973) that our understanding of the manner in which actual withdrawal decisions are made is far from complete. Perhaps the expanded taxonomy may add to a somewhat better understanding.

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Table 2

DYSFUNCTIONAL/FUNCTIONAL CLASSIFICATION OF TURNOVER BY QUALITY OF EMPLOYEE (7 Month Period)

_		high quality employee +	low quality employee -	
S EVALUATION NIZATION	No initiation of voluntary turnover	A employee remains n≈856 (61.6%)	B employee fired n=92 (6.6%)] т
INDIVIDUAL OF ORGA	Initiation of voluntary turnover	C employee quits Dysfunctional Turnover n=256 (18.4%)	Demployee quits Functional Turnover n=185 (13.3%)	

TOTAL N=1389 (100%)

DYSFUNCTIONAL/FUNCTIONAL CLASSIFICATION OF TURNOVER BY REPLACEABILITY OF EMPLOYEE (7 Month Period)

D

easily replaced

employee

fired

n=92

(6.6%)

employee quits

Functional

Turnover n=314

(22.9%)

not easily replaced

employee

remains

n=856

(61.6%)

employee quits Dysfunctional

Turnover

n=121 (8.8%)

A

T

B

INDIVIDUAL'S EVALUATION OF ORGANIZATION

TOTAL N=1383 (100%)

ſ

Initiation of voluntary turnover

No initiation of

voluntary turnover

Table 4

Unavoidable Turnover in Dysfunctional/Functional Classification

		BY QUALITY OF Total Voluntar (N=441)	EMPLOYEE ^a Y Turnover	BY REPLACEABILIT Total Voluntar (N=435)	<u>Y OF EMPLOYEE^b y Turnover</u>
		Dysfunctional (N=256;58.0%)	Functional (N=185;42.0%)	Dysfunctional (N=121;27.8%)	Functional (N=314; 72.2%)
less:	UNAVOIDABLE TURNOVER				
	Temporary	1	2	Ο	£
	Summer	22	11	14	17
	Education	30	18	12	36
	Health	15	13	7	21
	Family Commitment	37	20	23	34
	Personal (undisclosed)	7	15	4	18
	Job Abandonment	2	8	2	=
	TOTAL UNAVOIDABLE SEPARATIONS	N=117 (45.7%)) N=87 (47.0%)	N=62 (51.2%)	N=140 (44.6%)
	CONTROLLABLE SEPARATIONS	N=139 (54.2%) N=98 (52.9⅔)	N=59 (48.7%)	N=174 (55.4%)

^a number of cases from Table 2 b number of cases from Table 3

Table 5



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Chief of Naval Operations Assistant, Personnel Logistics Planning (Op-987H) The Pentagon, 5D772 Washington, DC 20350 P4-5/A7

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LIST 4 NAVMAT & NPRDC

NAVMAT

Program Administrator for Manpower, Personnel, and Training MAT 0722 800 N. Quincy Street Arlington, VA 22217 Naval Material Command Management Training Center NAVMAT 09M32 Jefferson Plaza, Bldg #2, Rm 150 1421 Jefferson Davis Highway Arlington, VA 20360 Naval Material Command NAVMAT-OOK Washington, DC 20360 Naval Material Command NAVMAT-OOKB Washington, DC 20360 Naval Material Command (MAT-03) Crystal Plaza #5 Room 236 2211 Jefferson Davis Highway Arlington, VA 20360 NPRDC

Commanding Officer Naval Personnel R&D Center San Diego, CA 92152

Navy Personnel R&D Center Washington Liaison Office Building 200, 2N Washington Navy Yard Washington, DC 20374 (5 Copies)

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LIST 5 BUMED

Commanding Officer Naval Health Research Center San Diego, CA 92152

CDR William S. Maynard Psychology Department Naval Regional Medical Center San Diego, CA 92134

Naval Submarine Medical Research Laboratory Naval Submarine Base New London, Box 900 Groton, CT 06349

Director, Medical Service Corps Bureau of Medicine and Surgery Code 23 Department of the Navy Washington, DC 20372

Naval Aerospace Medical Research Lab Naval Air Station Pensacola, FL 32508

Program Manager for Human Performance Naval Medical R&D Command National Naval Medical Center Bethesda, MD 20014

Navy Medical R&D Command ATTN: Code 44 National Naval Medical Center Bethesda, MD 20014 P4-5/A11

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LIST 6 NAVAL ACADEMY AND NAVAL POSTGRADUATE SCHOOL

Naval Postgraduate School ATTN: Dr. Richard S. Elster Department of Administrative Sciences Monterey, CA 93940

Naval Postgraduate School ATTN: Professor John Senger Operations Research and Administrative Science Monterey, CA 93940

Superintendent Naval Postgraduate School Code 1424 Monterey, CA 93940

Naval Postgraduate School ATTN: Dr. James Arima Code 54-Aa Monterey, CA 93940

Naval Postgraduate School ATTN: Dr. Richard A. McGonigal Code 54 Monterey, CA 93940

U.S. Naval Academy ATTN: CDR J. M. McGrath Department of Leadership and Law Annapolis, MD 21402

Professor Carson K. Eoyang Naval Postgraduate School, Code 54EG Department of Administration Sciences Monterey, CA 93940

Superintendent ATTN: Director of Research Naval Academy, U.S. Annapolis, MD 21402 P4-5/A13 Sequential by State/City/FPO 452:KD:716:lab 78u452-883 30 May 1981

LIST 7 HRM

Officer in Charge Human Resource Management Detachment Naval Air Station Alameda, CA 94591

Officer in Charge Human Resource Management Detachment Naval Submarine Base New London P.O. Box 81 Groton, CT 06340

Officer in Charge Human Resource Management Division Naval Air Station Mayport, FL 32228

Commanding Officer Human Resource Management Center Pearl Harbor, HI 96860

Commander in Chief Human Resource Management Division U.S. Pacific Fleet Pearl Harbor, HI 96860

Officer in Charge Human Resource Management Detachment Naval Base Charleston, SC 29408

Commanding Officer Human Resource Management School Naval Air Station Memphis Millington, TN 38054

Human Resource Management School Naval Air Station Memphis (96) Millington, TN 38054 P4-5/A14

List 7 (Continued)

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Commanding Officer Human Resource Management Center 1300 Wilson Boulevard Arlington, VA 22209

Commanding Officer Suman Resource Management Center S621-23 Tidewater Drive Norfolk, VA 23511

Commander in Chief Human Resource Management Division U.S. Atlantic Fleet Norfolk, VA 23511

Officer in Charge Human Resource Management Detachment Naval Air Station Whidbey Island Oak Harbor, WA 98278

Commanding Officer Human Resource Management Center Box 23 FPO New York 09510

Commander in Chief Human Resource Management Division U.S. Naval Force Europe FPO New York 09510

Officer in Charge Human Resource Management Detachment Box 60 FPO San Francisco 96651

Officer in Charge Human Resource Management Detachment COMNAVFORJAPAN FPO Seattle 98762 P4-5/Al6 Sequential by State/City 452:KD:716:lab 78u452-883 30 May 1981

LIST 8 NAVY MISCELLANEOUS

Naval Military Personnel Command (2 copies) HRM Department (NMPC-6) Washington, DC 20350

Naval Training Analysis and Evaluation Group Orlando, FL 32813

Commanding Officer ATTN: TIC, Bldg. 2068 Naval Training Equipment Center Orlando, FL 32813

Chief of Naval Education and Training (N-5) Director, Research Development, Test and Evaluation Naval Air Station Pensacola, FL 32508

Chief of Naval Technical Training ATTN: Dr. Norman Kerr, Code 017 NAS Memphis (75) Millington, TN 38054

Navy Recruiting Command Head, Research and Analysis Branch Code 434, Room 8001 801 North Randolph Street Arlington, VA 22203

Commanding Officer USS Carl Vinson (CVN-70) Newport News Shipbuilding & Drydock Company Newport News, VA 23607

Charles States

P4-5/A18

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Service States and States

AND DEPOSITOR OF A DESCRIPTION

LIST 9 USMC

Headquarters, U.S. Marine Corps Code MPI-20 Washington, DC 20380

Headquarters, U.S. Marine Corps ATTN: Dr. A. L. Slafkosky, Code RD-1 Washington, DC 20380

Education Advisor Education Center (E031) MCDEC Quantico, VA 22134

Commanding Officer Education Center (E031) MCDEC Quantico, VA 22134

Commanding Officer U.S. Marine Corps Command and Staff College Quantico, VA 22134 P4-5/A20 Sequential by Principal Investigator 452:KD:716:enj 78u452-883 24 May 1981

LIST 10 DARPA

(3 copies)

Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency Director, Cybernetics Technology Office 1400 Wilson Blvd, Rm 625 Arlington, VA 22209

Mr. Michael A. Daniels International Public Policy Research Corporation 6845 Elm Street, Suite 212 McLean, VA 22101

Dr. A. F. K. Organski Center for Political Studies Institute for Social Research University of Michigan Ann Arbor, MI 48106 P4-5/A23 Sequential by Agency 452:KD:716:enj 78u452-883 24 June 1981

LIST 11 OTHER FEDERAL GOVERNMENT

Dr. Douglas Hunter Defense Intelligence School Washington, DC 20374

Dr. Brian Usilaner GAO Washington, DC 20548

National Institute of Education ATTN: Dr. Fritz Mulhauser FOLC/SMO 1200 19th Street, N.W. Washington, DC 20208

National Institute of Mental Health Division of Extramural Research Programs 5600 Fishers Lane Rockville, MD 20852

National Institute of Mental Health Minority Group Mental Health Programs Room 7 - 102 5600 Fishers Lane Rockville, MD 20852

Office of Personnel Management Office of Planning and Evaluation Research Management Division 1900 E Street, N.W. Washington, DC 20415

Office of Personnel Management ATTN: Ms. Carolyn Burstein 1900 E Street, NW. Washington, DC 20415

Office of Personnel Management ATTN: Mr. Jeff Kane Personnel R&D Center 1900 E Street, N.W. Washington, DC 20415

Chief, Psychological Research Branch ATTN: Mr. Richard Lanterman U.S. Coast Guard (G-P-1/2/TP42) Washington, DC 20593 P4-5/A24 Sequential by Agency 452:KD:716:enj 78u452-883 24 June 1981

LIST 11 CONT'D

OTHER FEDERAL GOVERNMENT

Social and Developmental Psychology Program National Science Foundation Washington, DC 20550 P4-5/A25 Sequential by State/City 452:KD:716:enj 78u452-883 24 June 1981

which have been a set where were

LIST 12 ARMY

Headquarters, FORSCOM ATTN: AFPR-HR Ft. McPherson, GA 30330

Army Research Institute Field Unit - Leavenworth P.O. Box 3122 Fort Leavenworth, KS 66027

Technical Director Army Research Institute 5001 Eisenhower Avenue Alexandria, VA 22333

Director Systems Research Laboratory 5001 Eisenhower Avenue Alexandria, VA 22333

Director Army Research Institute Training Research Laboratory 5001 Eisenhower Avenue Alexandria, VA 22333

Dr. T. O. Jacobs Code PERI-IM Army Research Institute 5001 Eisenhower Avenue Alexandria, VA 22333

COL Howard Prince Head, Department of Behavior Science and Leadership U.S. Military Academy, New York 10996 P4-5/A27 Sequential by State/City 452:KD:716:enj 78u452-883 24 June 1981

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LIST 13 AIR FORCE

Air University Library/LSE 76-443 Maxwell AFB, AL 36112

COL John W. Williams, Jr. Head, Department of Behavioral Science and Leadership U.S. Air Force Academy, CO 80840

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AFMPC/MPCYPR Randolph AFB, TX 78150 P4-5/A29 Sequential by State/City 452:KD:716:1ab 78u452-883 30 May 1981

in the

LIST 14. MISCELLANEOUS

Australian Embassy Office of the Air Attache (S3B) 1601 Massachusetts Avenue, N.W. Washington, DC 20036

British Embassy Scientific Information Officer Room 509 3100 Massachusetts Avenue, N.W. Washington, DC 20008

Canadian Defense Liaison Staff, Washington ATTN: CDRD 2450 Massachusetts Avenue, N.W. Washington, DC 20008 Commandant, Royal Military College of Canada ATTN: Department of Military Leadership and Management Kingston, Ontario K7L 2W3

National Defence Headquarters ATTN: DPAR Ottawa, Ontario KIA OK2

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Dr. Henry Emurian The Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Science Baltimore, MD 21205

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LIST 15 (Continued)

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LIST 15 (Continued)

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LIST 15 (Continued)

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