



The Constant Comparative Method of Qualitative Analysis

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Currently, the general approaches to the analysis of qualitative data are these:

- 1.) If the analyst wishes to convert qualitative data into crudely quantifiable form so that he can provisionally test a hypothesis, he codes the data first and then analyzes it. He makes an effort to code “all relevant data [that] can be brought to bear on a point,” and then systematically assembles, assesses and analyzes these data in a fashion that will “constitute proof for a given proposition.”ⁱ
- 2.) If the analyst wishes only to generate theoretical ideas new categories and their properties, hypotheses and interrelated hypotheses- he cannot be confined to the practice of coding first and then analyzing the data since, in generating theory, he is constantly redesigning and reintegrating his theoretical notions as he reviews his material.ⁱⁱ Analysis with his purpose, but the explicit coding itself often seems an unnecessary, burdensome task. As a result, the analyst merely inspects his data for new properties of his theoretical categories, and writes memos on these properties.

We wish to suggest a third approach to the analysis of qualitative data- one that combines, by an analytic procedure of constant comparison, the explicit coding procedure of the first approach and the style of theory development of the second. The purpose of the constant comparative method of joint coding and analysis is to generate theory more systematically than allowed by the second approach, *by using explicit coding and analytic procedures*. While more systematic than the second approach, this method does not adhere completely to the first, which hinders the development of theory because it is designed for provisional testing, not discovering, of hypotheses.ⁱⁱⁱ This method of comparative analysis is to be used jointly with theoretical sampling, whether for collective new data or on previously collected or compiled qualitative data.

Systematizing the second approach (inspecting data and redesigning a developing theory) by this method does not supplant the skills and sensitivities required in generating theory. Rather, the constant comparative method is designed to aid the analyst who possesses these abilities in generating a theory that is integrated, consistent, plausible, close to the data and at the same time

is in a form clear enough to be readily, if only partially, operationalized for testing in quantitative research. Still dependent on the skills and sensitivities of the analyst, the constant comparative method is not designed (as methods of quantitative analysis are) to guarantee that two analysts working independently with the same data will achieve the same results; it is designed to allow, with discipline, for some of the vagueness and flexibility that aid the creative generation of theory.

If a researcher using the first approach (coding all data first) wishes to discover some or all of the hypotheses to be tested, typically he makes his discoveries by using the second approach of inspection and memo-writing along with explicit coding. By contrast, the constant comparative method cannot be used for both provisional testing and discovering theory: in theoretical sampling, the data collected are not extensive enough and, because of theoretical saturation, are not coded extensively enough to yield provisional tests, as they are in the first approach. They are coded only enough to generate, hence to suggest, theory. Partial testing of theory, when necessary, is left to more rigorous approaches (sometimes qualitative but usually quantitative). These come later in the scientific enterprise (see Chapter X).

The first approach also differs in another way from the constant comparative method. It is usually concerned with a few hypotheses couched at the same level of generality, while our method is concerned with many hypotheses synthesized at different levels of generality. The reason for this difference between methods is that the first approach must keep the theory tractable so that it can be provisionally tested in the same presentation. Of course, the analyst, using this approach might, after proving or disproving this hypotheses, attempt to explain his findings with more general ideas suggested by his data, this achieving some synthesis different levels of generality.

A fourth general approach to qualitative analysis is “analytic induction,” which combines the first and second approaches in a manner different from the constant comparative method. Analytic induction has been concerned with generating and proving an integrated, limited, precise, universally applicable theory of causes accounting for a specific behavior (*e.g.*, drug addiction, embezzlement). In line with the first approach, it tests a limited number of hypotheses with all available data, consisting of numbers of clearly defined and carefully selected cases of phenomena. Following the second approach, the theory is generated by the reformation of hypotheses and redefinition of the phenomena forced by constantly confronting the theory with negative cases, cases which do not confirm the current formulation.

In contrast to analytic induction, the constant comparative method is concerned with generating and plausibly suggesting (but not provisionally testing) many categories, properties, and hypotheses about general problems (*e.g.*, the distribution of services according to the social value of clients). Some of these properties may be causes, as in analytic induction, but unlike analytic induction, others are conditions, consequences, dimensions, types, processes, etc. In both approaches, these properties should result in an integrated theory. Further, no attempt is made by the constant comparative method, unlike analytic induction, is more likely to be applied in the same study to any kind of qualitative information, including observations, interviews, documents, articles, books, and so forth. As a consequence, the constant comparisons required by

both methods differ in breadth of purpose, extent of comparing, and what data and ideas are compared.

Clearly the purposes of both these methods for generating theory supplement each other, as well as the first and second approaches. All four methods provide different alternative to qualitative analysis. Table I locates the use of the approaches to qualitative analysis and provides a scheme for locating additional approaches according to their purposes. The general idea of the constant comparative method can also be used for generating theory in quantitative research. Then one compares findings within subgroups and with external groups (see Chapter VIII).

Table I. Use of Approaches to Qualitative Analysis (cannot be shown, see PDF Version)

The Constant Comparative Method

We shall describe in four stages the constant comparative method: (1) comparing incidents applicable to each category, (2) integrating categories and their properties, (3) delimited the theory, and (4) writing the theory. Although this method of generating theory is a continuously growing process- each stage after a time is transformed into the next- earlier stages do remain in operation simultaneously throughout the analysis and each provides continuous development to its successive stage until the analysis is terminated.

Comparing incidents applicable to each category. The analyst starts by coding each incident in his data into as many categories of analysis as possible, as categories emerge or as data emerge that fit an existing category. For example, the category of “social loss” of dying patients emerged quickly from comparisons of nurses’ responses to the potential deaths of their patients. Each relevant response involved the nurse’s appraisal of the degree of loss that her patient would be to his family, his occupation, or society: “He was so young,” “He was to be a doctor,” “She had a full life,” or “What will the children and her husband do without her?”^v

Coding need consist only of noting categories on margins, but can be done more elaborately (e.g., on cards). It should keep track of the comparison group in which the incident occurs. To this procedure we add the basic, defining rule for the constant comparative method: *while coding an incident for a category, compare it with the previous incidents in the same and different groups coded in the same category.* For example, as the analyst codes an incident in which a nurse responds to the potential “social loss” of a dying patient, he also compares this incident, before further coding, with others previously coded in the same category. Since coding qualitative data requires study of each incident, this comparison can often be based on memory. Usually there is no need to refer to the actual note on every previous incident for each comparison.

This constant comparison of the incidents very soon starts to generate theoretical properties of the category. The analyst starts thinking in terms of the full range of types or continua of the category, its dimensions, the conditions under which it is pronounced or minimized, its major consequences, its relation to other categories, and its other properties. For example, while constantly comparing incidents on how nurses respond to the social loss of dying patients, we realized that some patients are perceived as a high social loss and others as a low social loss, and

that patient care tends to vary positively with degree of social loss. It was also apparent that some social attributes that nurses' combine to establish a degree of social loss are seen immediately (age, ethnic group, social class). While some are learned after time is spent with the patient (occupational worth, marital status, education). This observation led us to the realization that perceived social loss can change as new attributes of the patients are learned. It also becomes apparent, from studying the comparison groups, under what conditions (types of wards and hospitals) we would find clusters of patients with different degrees or social loss.

As categories and their properties emerge, the analyst will discover two kinds: those that he had constructed himself (such as "social loss" or "calculation" of social loss); and those that have been abstracted from the language of the research situation. (for example, "composure" was derived from nurses' statements like "I was afraid of losing my composure when the family started crying over their child.") As his theory develops, the analyst will notice that the concepts abstracted from the substantive situation will tend to be the current labels in use for the actual processes and behaviors that are to be explained, while the concepts constructed by the analyst will tend to be the explanations.^{vi} For example, a nurse's perception of the social loss of a dying patient will affect (an explanation) how she maintains her composure (a behavior) in his presence.

After coding for a category perhaps three or four times, the analyst will find conflicts in the emphases of his thinking. He will be musing over theoretical notions and, at the same time, trying to concentrate on his study of the next incident, to determine the alternate ways by which it should be coded and compared. At this point the second rule of the constant comparative method is: *stop coding and record a memo on your ideas*. This rule is designed to tap the initial freshness of the analyst's theoretical notions and to relieve the conflict in his thoughts. In doing so, the analyst should take as much time as necessary to reflect and carry his thinking to its most logical (grounded in the data, not speculative) conclusions. It is scheduled routine covering the amount to be coded per day, as there is in predesigned research. The analyst may spend hours on one page or he may code twenty pages in a half hour, depending on the relevance of the material, saturation of categories, emergence of new categories, stage or formulation of theory, and of course, the mood of the analyst, since this method takes his personal sensitivity into consideration. These factors are in a continual process of change.

If one is working on a research team, it is also a good idea to discuss theoretical notions with one and more teammates. Teammates can help bring out points missed, add points they have run across in their own coding and data collection, and crosscheck his points. They, too, being to compare the analyst's notions with their own ideas and knowledge of the data; this comparison generates additional theoretical ideas. With clearer ideas on the emerging theory systematically recorded, the analyst then returns to the data for more coding and constant comparison.

From the point of view of generating theory it is often useful to write memos on, as well as code, the copy of one's field notes. Memo writing on the field note provides an immediate illustration for an idea. Also, since an incident can be coded for several categories, this tactic forces the analyst to use an incident as an illustration only once, for the most important among the many properties of diverse categories that it indicates. He must look elsewhere in his notes for

illustration for his other properties and categories. This corrects the tendency to use the same illustration over and over for different properties.

The generation of theory requires that the analyst take apart the story within his data. Therefore when he rearranges his memos and field notes for writing up his theory, he sufficiently “fractures” his story at the same time that he saves apt illustrations for each idea (see Step 4). At just this point in his writing, breaking down and out of the story is necessary for clear integration of the theory.

Integrating categories and their properties. This process starts out in a small way; memos and possible conferences are short. But as the coding continues, the constant comparative units change from comparison of incident with incident to comparison of incident with properties of the category that resulted from initial comparisons of incidents. For example, in comparing incident with incident we discovered the property that nurses constantly recalculate a patient’s social loss as they learn more about him. From then on, each incident bearing on “calculation” was compared with “accumulated knowledge on calculating”- not with all other incidents involving calculation. Thus, once we found that age was the most important characteristic in calculating social loss, we could discern how a patient’s age affected the nurses’ recalculation of social loss as they found out more about his education. We found that education was most influential in calculations of the social loss of a middle-aged adult, since for a person of this age, education was considered to be of most social worth. This example also shows that constant comparison causes the accumulated knowledge pertaining to a property of the category to readily start to become integrated; that is, related in many different ways, resulting in a unified whole.

In addition, the diverse properties themselves start to become integrated. Thus, we soon found that the calculating and recalculating of social loss by nurses was related to their development of a social loss “story” about the patient. When asked about a dying patient, nurses would tell what amounted to a story about him. The ingredients of this story consisted of a continual balancing out of social loss factors as the nurses learned more about the patient. Both the calculus of social loss and the social loss story were related to the nurse’s strategies for coping with the upsetting impact on her professional composure of, say, a dying patient with a high social loss (e.g., a mother with two children). This example further shows that the category becomes integrated with other categories of analysis; the social loss of the dying patient is related to how nurses maintain professional composure while attending his dying.vii Thus the theory develops as different categories and their properties tend to become integrated through constant comparisons that force the analyst to make some related theoretical sense of each comparison.

If the data are collected by theoretical sampling at the same time that they are analyzed (as we suggest should be done), then integration of the theory is more likely to emerge by itself. By joint collection and analysis, the sociologist is tapping the fullest extent the in vivo patterns of integration in the data itself; questions guide the collection of data to fill in gaps and to extend the theory- and this also is an integrative strategy. Emergence of integration schemes also occurs in analyses that are separate from data collection, but more contrivance may be necessary when the data run thin and no more can be collected. (Other aspects of integration have been discussed in Chapter II.)

Delimiting the theory. As the theory develops, various delimiting features of the constant comparative method begin to curb what could otherwise become an overwhelming task. Delimiting occurs at two levels: the theory and the categories. First, the theory solidifies, in the sense that major modifications become fewer and fewer as the analyst compares the next incidents of a category to its properties. Later modifications are mainly on the order of clarifying the logic, taking out nonrelevant properties, integrating elaborating details of properties into the major outline of interrelated categories and –most important–reduction.

By reduction we mean that the analyst may discover underlying uniformities in the original set of categories or their properties, and can then formulate the theory with a smaller set of higher level concepts. This delimits its terminology and text. Here is an illustration which shows the integration of more details into the theory and some consequent reduction: We decide to elaborate our theory by adding detailed strategies used by the nurses to maintain professional composure while taking care of patients with varying degrees of social loss. We discovered that the rationales which nurses used, when talking among themselves, could all be considered “loss rationales.” The underlying uniformity was that all these rationales indicated why the patient, given his degree of social loss, would, if he lived, now would be socially worthless: in spite of the social loss, he would be better off dead. For example, he would have brain damage, or be in constant, unendurable pain, or have no chance for a normal life.

Through further reduction of terminology we were also discovering that our theory could be generalized so that it pertained to the care of all patients (not just the dying ones) by all staff (not just nurses). On the level of formal theory, it could even be generalized as a theory of how the social values of professionals affect the distribution of their services to clients; for examples, how they decide who among many waiting clients should next receive a service, and what caliber of service he should be given.

Thus, with reduction of terminology and consequent generalizing forced by constant comparisons (some comparisons can at this point be based on the literature of other professional areas), the analyst starts to achieve two major requirements of theory: (1) *parsimony* of variables and formulation, and (2) scope in the applicability of the theory to a wide range of situations, viii while keeping a close correspondence of theory and data.

The second level for delimiting the theory is a reduction in the original list of categories for coding. As the theory grows, becomes reduced, and increasingly works better for ordering a mass of qualitative data, the analyst becomes committed to it. His commitment now allows him to cut down the original list of categories for collecting and coding data, according to the present boundaries of his theory. In turn, his consideration, coding, and analyzing of incidents can become more select and focused. He can devote more time to the constant comparison of incidents clearly applicable to this smaller set of categories.

Another factor, which still further delimits the list of categories, is that they become theoretically saturated. After an analyst has coded incidents for the same category a number of times, he learns to see quickly whether or not the next applicable incident points to a new aspect. If yes, then the incident is coded and compared. If no, the incident is not coded, since it only adds bulk to the coded data and nothing to the theory. ix For example, after we had established age as the

base line for calculating social loss, no longer did we need to code incidents referring to age for calculating social loss. However, if we came across a case where age did not appear to be the base line (a negative case), the case was coded and then compared. In the case of an 85-year-old dying woman who was considered a great social loss, we discovered that her “wonderful personality” outweighed her age as the most important factor for calculating her social loss. In addition, the amount of data the analyst needs to code is considerably reduced when the data are obtained by theoretical sampling; thus he saves time in studying his data for coding.

Theoretical saturation of categories also can be employed as a strategy in coping with another problem: new categories will emerge after hundreds of pages of coding, and the question is whether or not to go back and re-code all previously coded pages. The answer for large studies is “no”. The analyst should start to code for the new category where it emerges, and continue for a few hundred pages of coding, or until the remaining (or additionally collected) data have been coded, to see whether the new category has become theoretically saturated. If it has, then it is unnecessary to go back, either to the field or the notes, because theoretical saturation suggests that what has been missed will probably have little modifying effect on the theory. If the category does not saturate, then the analyst needs to go back and try to saturate it, provided it is central to the theory.

Theoretical saturation can help solve still another problem concerning categories. If the analyst has collected his own data, then from time to time he will remember other incidents that he observed or heard but did not record. What does he do now? If the unrecorded incident applies to an established category, after comparison it can either be ignored because the category is saturated; or, if it indicates a new property of the category, it can be added to the next memo and thus integrated into the theory. If the remembered incident generates a new category, both incident and category can be included in a memo directed toward their place in the theory. However, if it becomes central to the theory, the memo becomes a directive for further coding of the field notes and for returning to the field or library to collect more data.

The universe of data that the constant comparative method uses is based on the reduction of the theory and the delimitation and saturation of categories. Thus, the collected universe of data is first delimited and then, if necessary, carefully extended by a return to data collection according to the requirements of theoretical sampling. Research resources are economized by this theoretical delimiting of the possible universe of data, since working within limits forced the analyst to spend his time and effort only on data relevant to his categories. In large field studies, with long lists of possibly useful categories and thousands of pages of notes embodying thousands of incidents, each of which could be coded a multitude of ways, theoretical criteria are very necessary for paring down an otherwise monstrous task to fit the available resources of personnel, time, and money. Without Theoretical criteria, delimiting a universe of collected data, if done at all, can become very arbitrary and less likely to yield an integrated product; the analyst is also more likely to waste time on what may later prove to be irrelevant incidents and categories.

Writing theory. At this stage in the process of qualitative analysis, the analyst possesses coded data, a series of memos, and a theory. The discussions in his memos provide the content behind the categories, which become the major themes of the theory later presented in papers or books.

For example, the major themes (section titles) for our paper on social loss were “calculating social loss,” “the patient’s social loss story,” and “the impact of social loss on the nurse’s professional composure.”

When the research is convinced that his analytic framework forms a systematic substantive theory, that it is a reasonably accurate statement of the matters studied, and that it is couched in a form that other going into the same field could use- then he can publish his results with confidence. To start writing one’s theory, it is first necessary to collate the memos on each category, which is easily accomplished since the memos have been written about categories. Thus, we brought together all memos on calculating social loss for summarizing and, perhaps, further analyzing before writing about it. One can return to the coded data when necessary to validate a suggested point, pinpoint data behind a hypothesis or gaps in the theory, and provide illustrations.x

Properties of the Theory

Using the constant comparative method makes probably the achievement of a complex theory that corresponds closely to the data, since the constant comparisons force the analyst to consider much diversity in the data. By diversity we mean that each incident is compared with other incidents, or with properties of a category, in terms of as many similarities and differences as possible. This mode of comparing is in contrast to coding for crude proofs; such coding only establishes whether an incident indicates the few properties of the category that are being counted.

The constant comparison of incidents in this manner tends to result in the creation of a “developmental” theory.xi Although this method can also be used to generate static theories, it especially facilitates the generation of theories of process, sequence, and change pertaining to organizations, positions, and social interaction. But whether the theory itself is static or developmental, its generation, by this method and by theoretical sampling, is continually in process. In comparing incidents, the analyst learns to see his categories in terms of both their internal development and their changing relations to other categories. For example, as the nurse learns more about the patient, her calculations of social loss change; and these recalculations change their social loss stories, her loss rationales and her care of the patient.

This is an inductive method of theory development. To make theoretical sense of so much diversity in his data, the analyst is forced to develop ideas on a level of a generality higher in conceptual abstraction than the qualitative material being analyzed. He is forced to bring out underlying uniformities and diversities, and to use more abstract concepts to account for differences in the data. To master his data, he is forced to engage in reduction of terminology. If the analyst starts with raw data, he will end up initially with a substantive theory: a theory for the substantive area on which he has done research (for example, patient care or gang behavior). If he starts with the findings drawn from many studies pertaining to an abstract sociological category, he will end up with a formal theory pertaining to a conceptual area (such as stigma, deviance, lower class, status congruency, organizational careers, or reference groups).xii To be sure, as we described in Chapter IV, the level of generality of s substantive theory can be raised to a formal theory. (Our theory of dying patients’ social loss could be raised to the level of how

professional people give service to clients according to their respective social value.) This move to formal theory requires additional analysis of one's substantive theory, and the analyst should, as stated in the previous chapter, include material from other studies with the same formal theoretical import, however diverse their substantive content.^{xiii} The point is that the analyst should be aware of the level of generality from which he starts in relation to the level at which he starts in relation to the level at which he wishes to end.

The constant comparative method can yield either discussion or propositional theory. The analyst may wish to cover many properties of a category in his discussion or to write formal propositions about a category. The former type of presentation is often sufficiently useful at the exploratory stage of theory development, and can easily be translated into propositions by the reader if he requires a formal hypothesis. For example, two related categories of dying are the patient's social loss and the amount of attention he receives from nurses. This can easily be restated as a proposition: patients considered a high social loss, as compared with those considered a low social loss, will tend to receive more attention from nurses.

Endnotes

i Howard S. Becker and Blanche Geer, "The Analysis of Qualitative Field Data" in Richard N. Adams and Jack J. Preiss (Eds.), *Human Organization Research* (Homewood, Ill.:Dorsey Press, Inc., 1960), pp.279-89. See also Howard S. Becker, "Problems of Inference and Proof in Participant Observation," *American Sociological Review*, (December, 1958), pp. 652-60; and Bernard Berelson, *Content Analysis* (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press. 1952), Chapter III, and p. 16.

ii Constantly redesigning the analysis is a well-known normal tendency in qualitative research (no matter what the approach to analysis), which occurs through the whole research experience from initial data collection through coding to final analysis and writing. The tendency has been noted in Beck and Geer, *op. cit.*, p. 270, Berelson, *op. cit.*, p. 125; and for an excellent example of how it goes on, see Robert K. Merton, *Social Theory and Social Structure* (New York: Free Press of Glencoe, 1957), pp. 390-392. However, this tendency may have to be suppressed in favor of the purpose of the first approach; but in the second approach and the approach presented here, the tendency is used purposefully as an analytic strategy.

iii Our other purpose in presenting the constant comparative method may be indicated by a direct quotation from Robert K. Merton- a statement he made in connection with his own qualitative analysis of locals and cosmopolitans as community influentials: "This part of our report, then, is a bid to the sociological fraternity for the practice of incorporating in publications a detailed account of the ways in which qualitative analysis actually developed. Only when a considerable body of such reports are available will it be possible to codify methods of qualitative analysis with something of clarity with which quantitative methods have been articulated." *Op. cit.*, p. 390. This is, of course, also the basic position of Paul F. Lazarsfeld. See Allen H. Barton and Paul F. Lazarsfeld, "Some Functions of Qualitative Analysis in Social Research," in Seymour M. Lipset and Neil J. Smelser (Eds.), *Sociology: the Progress of a Decade* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1961). It is the position that has stimulated the work of Becker and Geer, and of Berelson, cited in Footnote 1.

iv See Alfred R Lindesmith, *Opiate Addiction* (Bloomington: Principia, 1947), pp. 12-14; Donald R. Cressey, *Other People's Money* (New York: Free Press of Glencoe, 1953), p. 16 and *passim*; and Florian Znaniecki, *The Method of Sociology* (New York: Farrar and Rinehart, 1934), pp. 249-331.

v Illustrations will refer to Barney G. Glaser and Anselm L. Strauss, "The Social Loss of Dying Patients," *American Journal of Nursing*, 64 (June, 1964) pp. 119-121.

vi Thus we have studies of delinquency, justice, "becoming," stigma, consultation, consolation, contraception, etc.; these usually become the variables or processes to be described and explained.

vii See Glaser and Strauss, "Awareness and the Nurse's Composure," in Chapter 13 in *Awareness of Dying* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Co., 1965).

viii Merton, *op. cit.*, p.260

ix If the analyst's purpose, besides developing theory, is also to count incidents for a category to establish provisional proofs, then he must code the incident. Furthermore, Merton has made the additional point, in correspondence, that to count for establishing provisional proofs may also feedback to developing the theory, since frequency and cross-tabulation of frequencies can also generate new theoretical ideas. See Berelson on the conditions under which one can justify time-consuming, careful counting; *op. cit.*, pp.128-134. See Becker and Geer for a new method of counting the frequency of incidents; *op. cit.*, pp. 283-87.

x On "pinpointing" see Anselm Strauss, Leonard Schatzman, Rue Bucher, Danuta Ehrlich and Melvin Shabshin, *Psychiatric Ideologies and Institutions* (New York: Free Press of Glencoe, 1964), Chapter 2, "Logic, Techniques and Strategies of Team Fieldwork."

xi Recent calls for more developmental, as opposed to static, theories have been made by Wilbert Moore, "Predicting Discontinuities in Social Change," *American Sociological Review* 29 (1964), p. 322; Howard S. Becker, *Outsiders* (New York: Free Press of Glencoe, 1962), pp. 22-25; and Barney G. Glaser and Anselm Strauss, "Awareness Contexts and Social Interaction," *op. cit.*

xii For an example, see Barney G. Glaser, *Organizational Careers* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Co., 1967).

xiii "...the development of any of these coherent analytic perspectives is not likely to come from those who restrict their interest exclusively to one substantive area." From Erving Goffman, *Stigma: Notes of the Management of Spoiled Identity* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1963), p. 147. See also Reinhard Bendix, "Concepts and generalizations in Comparative Sociological Studies," *American Sociological Review*, 28 (1963), pp. 532-39.