

**Wellbeing, Feelings of Personal Safety, and Fear of Crime:  
Towards a Conceptual Integration**

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## Wellbeing, Feelings of Personal Safety, and Fear of Crime: Towards a Conceptual Integration

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*Abstract: In spring 1992 the KFN conducted a victim survey entitled "Feelings of personal safety, fear of crime and violence, victimization of the elderly", using a nationwide representative sample (N=15771). In this paper the facet-approach used for specifying the lay concept of personal safety and for defining fear of crime is sketched out and results from a structural analysis of stressors, including crime, are reported.*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

In the past, criminological research has mostly failed to define fear of crime in an unambiguous and comprehensive way. Furthermore, findings have not been related systematically to psychological theory and research. Consequently, former analyses often did not go beyond mere description of the investigated phenomena, and attempts to explain research findings are rare and mostly remained vague.

In spring 1992 the KFN conducted a victim survey entitled "Feelings of Personal Safety, Fear of Crime and Violence, Victimization of the Elderly", using a nationwide representative sample (see Bilsky, Pfeiffer & Wetzels, 1993a).<sup>1</sup> On the whole, 15771 interviewees participated in this study. Aside from variables focusing on extra- and intrafamily violence and criminal victimization, elaborated item batteries on fear of crime and feelings of personal safety were applied to several subsamples of this survey, as were additional psychological and sociological measures to be used for linking victimization and fear variables to theoretically established constructs.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This research project was funded by the Ministry of Family Affairs and the Elderly (BMFuS).

<sup>2</sup> For a more comprehensive description of the design and the questionnaire used see Bilsky, Pfeiffer and Wetzels (1993b).

In this paper the facet approach used for specifying the lay concept of personal safety and for defining fear of crime is sketched out. In addition, results from a structural analysis of stressors, including crime, are reported. This analysis was carried out in order to test the adequacy of our theoretical approach.

## 2. PERSONAL SAFETY AND FEAR OF CRIME

The term *personal safety* is derived from everyday language and does not have any clear equivalent in psychological or sociological theory. As used in the title of the KFN survey, however, feelings of personal safety are supposed to be threatened by different factors, including crime. Consequently, these factors can be conceived as stressors causing strain in the individual because of the perceived discrepancy between the desired and the real status of personal safety. From psychological research we know that the absence of strain is a central and defining feature of subjective *wellbeing* (Mayring, 1991). Therefore, we drew on these research findings (e.g., Andrews, 1986; Levy & Guttman, 1989) and on victimological studies (e.g., Young, 1991) in order to specify dimensions which are supposed to be helpful in systematically distinguishing stressors of personal safety.

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Person (x) feels strained by potential

injury  
 ( material )  
 ( physical ) injury as a consequence of events in his/her  
 ( psychological )

environment  
 ( primary ) social environment in life area  
 ( secondary )

life area  
 ( health )  
 ( work )  
 ( economy )  
 ( social )  
 ( residence )

⇒  $R_{\text{strain}}$   
 ( high )  
 ( ... ) strain.  
 ( low )

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Figure 1: Mapping Sentence of Feelings of Personal Safety

These dimensions were integrated into one general mapping sentence of feelings of personal safety (strain) (see figure 1). Next this general mapping sentence was specified and expanded to facilitate the distinction between different forms of *fear of crime*. This was accomplished by borrowing from value-expectancy theories of motivation, psychological analyses of stress and anxiety, and criminological research (figure 2; for more details see Bilsky & Wetzels, 1994a; Bilsky & Wetzels, 1994b; Bilsky, Pfeiffer & Wetzels, 1993a).

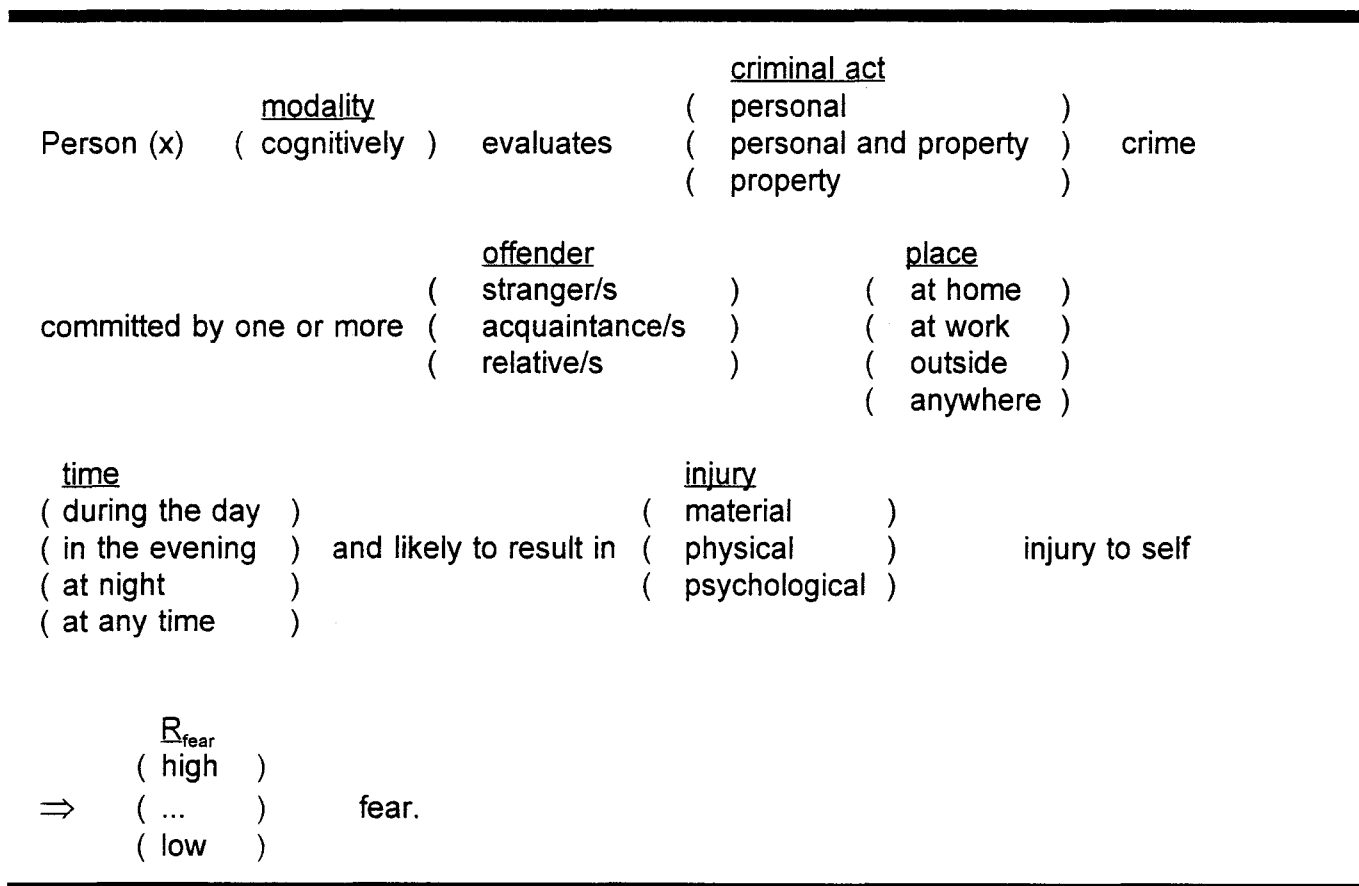


Figure 2: Expanded Mapping Sentence of Fear of Crime

Both mapping sentences served as frames of reference for selecting and constructing items for the survey instrument and for the analysis of survey data.

### 3. STRUCTURAL ANALYSIS OF STRESSORS

A first empirical test of our conceptual approach to feelings of personal safety and fear of crime was based on data from a pilot study which had been conducted in 1991 (N=213; cf., Bilsky & Wetzels, 1994a). The items used in that study and the respective structuples (specified according to the general mapping sentence of Feelings of Personal Safety; figure 1), are summarized in table 1.

Table 1: Item list A9 (Pilot Study)

"To what extent do you feel your personal safety to be threatened by the following events and dangers?"

No.	Item	Structuples	
		original	revised
A9A	Loss of job	c1 d1 e2	c1 <u>d2</u> e2
A9B	Inflation and economic crisis	c1 d2 e3	c1 d2 e3
A9C	Uncertainty of life annuity (pension)	c1 d2 e3	c1 d2 e3
A9D	Severe illness	c2 d1 e1	c2 d1 e1
A9E	War	c4 d2 e4	c2 d2 <u>e1</u>
A9F	Crime	c4 d3 e6	c4 d3 e6
A9G	Natural disaster	c4 d2 e6	c2 d2 e1
A9H	Crisis in the health service	c2 d2 e4	c2 d2 <u>e1</u>
A9J	Separation or loss of someone close	c3 d1 e4	c3 d1 e4
A9K	Environmental damage	c4 d2 e6	c2 d2 e1
A9L	To become dependent on someone	c3 d3 e4	c3 d1 e4
A9M	Accident	c2 d3 e6	c2 d1 e1
A9P	Loss of apartment	c1 d1 e5	c1 d1 e5
A9R	Chance	c4 d3 e6	c4 d3 e6
A9S	Family fights and anger	c3 d1 e4	c3 d1 e4

c1 = material

c2 = physical

c3 = psychological

c4 = unspecified

d1 = primary

d2 = secondary

d3 = unspecified

e1 = health

e2 = work

e3 = economy

e4 = social

e5 = residence

e6 = unspecified

Similarity structure analysis of item intercorrelations ( Borg & Lingo, 1987) resulted in a three-dimensional solution which seemed adequate for interpreting our data (coefficient of alienation = .12). As can be seen from the projection of items on dimensions 1 X 2 (figure 3), the injury and the social environment facet form a duplex, separating the respective elements as predicted.

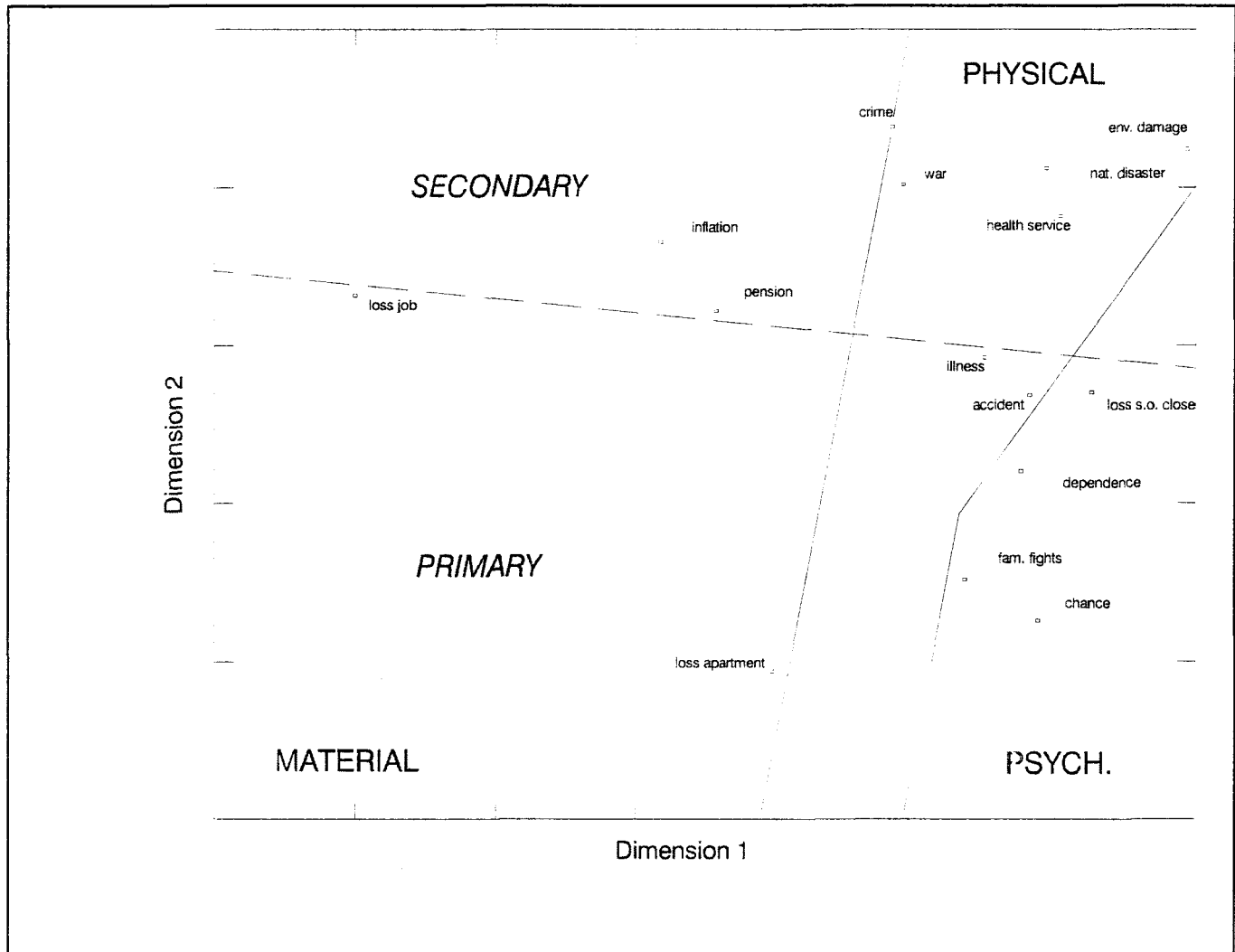
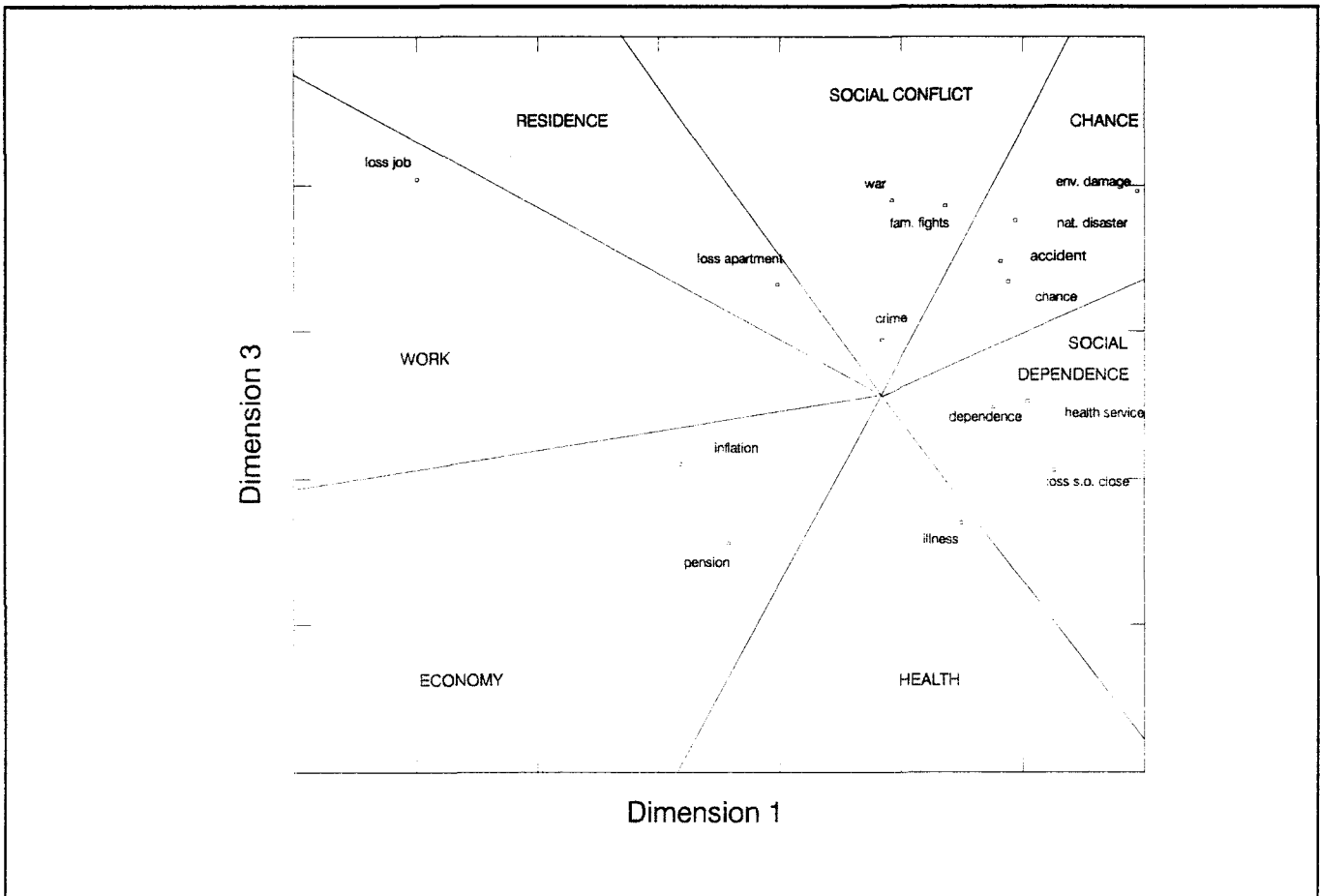


Figure 3: Three-dimensional SSA of Threats to Personal Safety, Pilot Study: Duplex of Environment and Injury

In addition, the life area facet plays a polar role on dimensions 1 X 3, partitioning the projection of items into wedgelike regions (see figure 4). However, one peculiarity of this latter partitioning needs mentioning: Items classified social split into two distinct sectors, separated by another one which includes highly unpredictable and uncontrollable events, i.e., environmental damage, natural disaster, accident, chance.



*Figure 4:* Three-dimensional SSA of Threats to Personal Safety  
Pilot Study: Life Areas

Although these results largely conform to our expectations (Bilsky & Wetzels, 1994a), we looked for alternative interpretations of our data which should be theoretically equivalent but more parsimonious. Reinspecting the semantics of our items revealed that some minor revisions of facetting (underlined elements in table 1) in fact result in a perfect two-dimensional solution (see figure 5). These revisions refer to a systemic interpretation of loss of job (secondary environment), and to the dominant impact on health of both war and crisis in the health services (life areas). As can be seen from figure 5, social environment now plays a modular role, forming a radex with the remaining facets injury and life areas (Levy, 1985).

This radex served as the hypothetical structure to be identified in analyzing the data of the representative sample (N=15771). Items used in the national survey correspond to those used in

the pilot study, apart from one exception: the crime item of the pilot study was split into (1) assault and (2) theft, robbery or fraud (cf., Bilsky, Pfeiffer & Wetzels, 1993b).

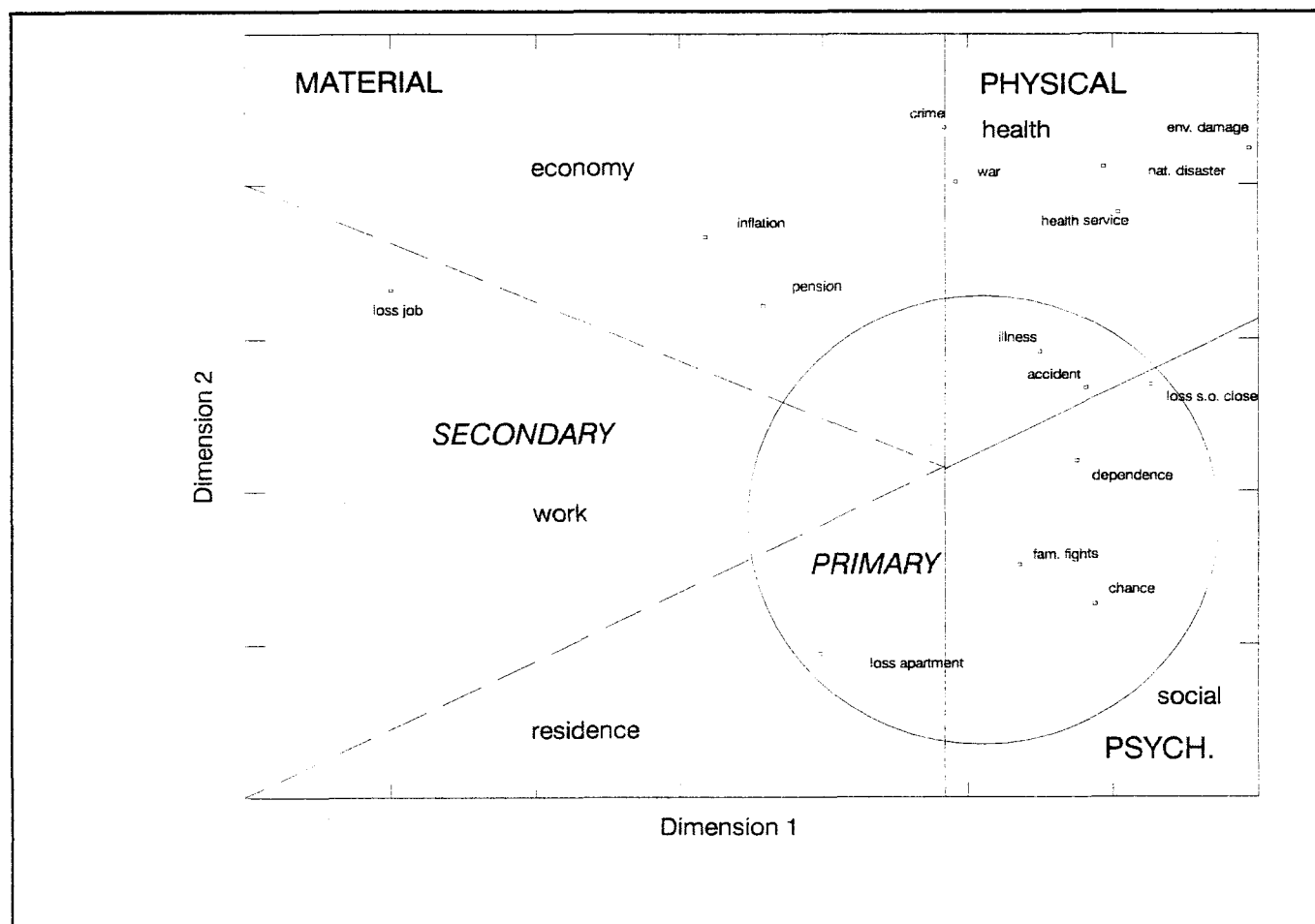


Figure 5: Three-dimensional SSA of Threats to Personal Safety, Pilot Study: Radex of Social Environment, Injury, and Life Areas

Figure 6 gives the result of the two-dimensional SSA of survey items. As can be seen, data perfectly fit our expectation since partitioning of items could be accomplished according to the revised facetting of potential stressors of personal safety (see table 1). It should be noted that crime as a whole, as investigated in the pilot study, is located in the secondary environment (figure 5), thus suggesting a systemic interpretation of this stressor. Concrete criminal acts against individuals, in contrast, are probably best understood as threats to one's own primary environment (figure 6).

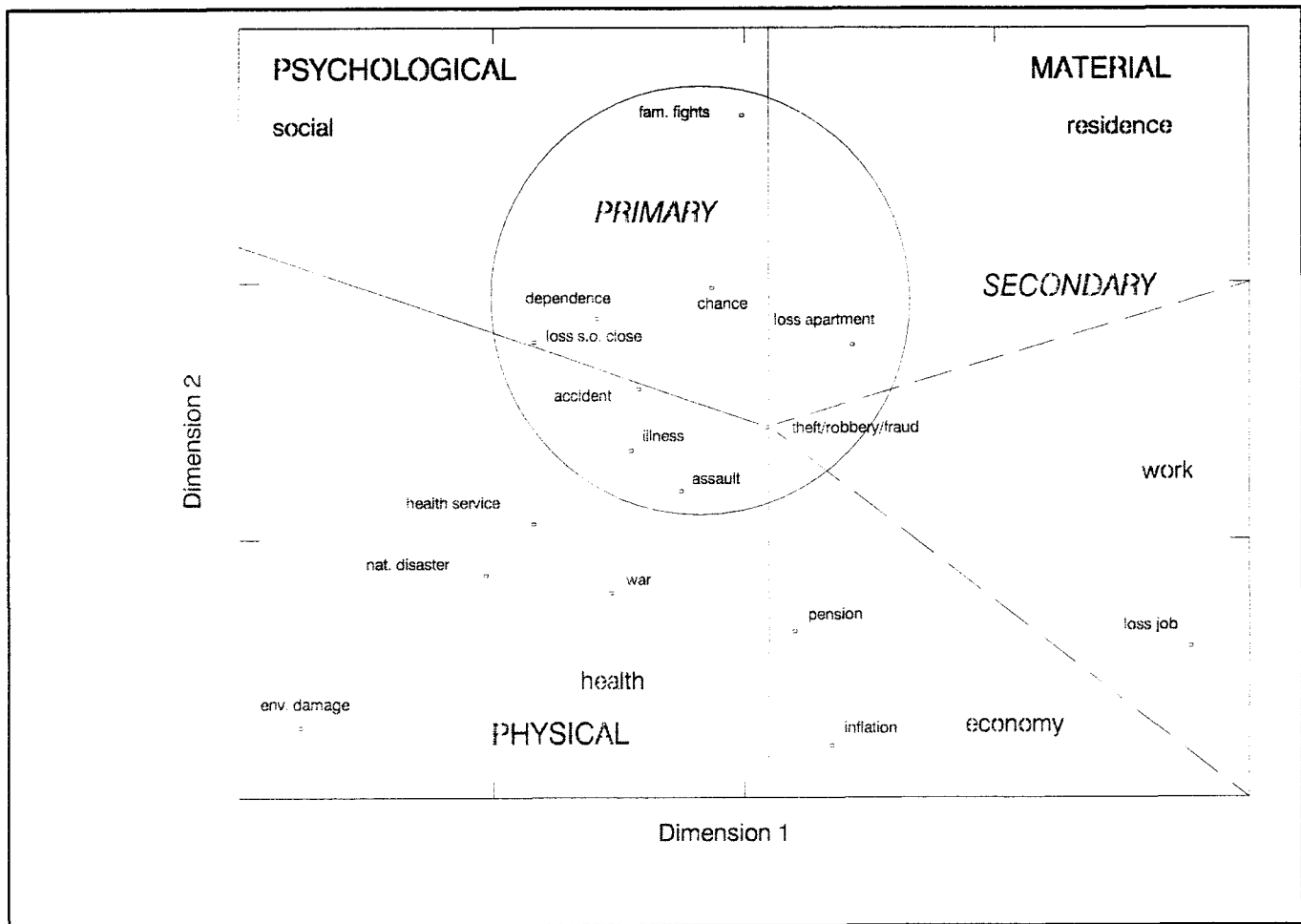


Figure 6: Two-dimensional SSA of Threats to Personal Safety, National Survey: Radex of Social Environment, Injury, and Life Areas

#### 4. RESEARCH PERSPECTIVES

Analyses presented thus far are only a first step in evaluating the survey data on feelings of personal safety and fear of crime (for more details see Wetzels, Greve, Mecklenburg, Bilsky & Pfeiffer, 1994). Next specific criminal stressors (theft, assault, robbery, sexual molestation, and rape) as defined by the expanded mapping sentence of fear of crime (figure 2) will be analyzed together with general non-criminal stressors. These analyses are expected to result in a common structure of stressors which is a necessary prerequisite for answering the following questions:

(1) Where is the position of crime within the structure of stressors both, when used as a fuzzy concept, or when differentiated into specific forms of delinquent acts?

(2) What is the rank of importance of crime as a whole or of different forms of crime when compared to other stressors of personal safety?

Answering these questions is not only of scientific interest - whether criminological, psychological, or sociological - but also of political interest.

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