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## THE CRISIS OF DIVORCE AND THE NATURE OF THE EXPERIENCED LIFE CHANGES

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**Abstract:** In this study, divorce is understood as a complex and multidimensional phenomenon. Furthermore, divorce is one of the most stressful life events – an event which changes almost every aspect of life. It has been assumed that for majority of people, divorce is related to a crisis or is viewed as a turning point in life.

The aim of this study is to verify whether the assessment of the impact of divorce on various spheres of life (housing situation, work, friends, children, etc.) is associated with different magnitude of experienced life changes (positive or negative). Positive changes may signify individual's ability to cope with critical life events (such as divorce); negative changes mean that people after divorce experience the negative impact of it on fundamental beliefs about the self as well as the value and meaning of life.

In this study, the Life Changes Scale (LCS), demographic data and divorce-related data were used. The difference significance tests were conducted between the groups. A total of 157 divorced individuals participated in the research. Three out of four participants were women (76.40%); a quarter of the group comprised of men (23.60%). The respondents' average age was 41 years.

Analyses have shown differences in the assessment of changes after divorce. The most important results include the occurrence of significant differences in experienced life changes (positive or negative) among divorced individuals, depending on the sphere of life in which the changes occurred.

**Keywords:** divorce, crisis, positive and negative life changes, sphere of change.

### 1. Introduction

Divorce is understood as a non-normative, unpredictable and undesirable crisis (cf. Beisert, 2000; Błażek, 2014). For years, it has been counted among the most stressful life events (Holmes, and Rahe, 1967; after: Plopa, and Makarowski, 2010) since it entails the necessity of

making changes in almost every sphere of life. It should be also emphasised that the experience of divorce goes beyond the expected course of life (Beisert, 2000): it is often unexpected thus difficult to predict for individual members of the family, which is why it requires implementation of new coping strategies and exposes individuals to emotional and cognitive consequences (Błażek, 2014). Beisert (2000) states that divorce is an important confrontation of an individual with change, which additionally carries the prediction of future changes (Beisert, 2000).

Psychology elaborates on the notion of critical life events understood as emotionally important events that are of great importance for human life (see Zięba, Wawrzyniak, and Świrkula, 2010). It can be said that there are interrelationships between crises and life events (Przetacznik-Gierowska, and Tyszkowa, 2005) and life events can be negative, positive or ambivalent in their nature. However, their impact is so strong that they disrupt daily functioning, require a change in life and readjusting to the environment (Sęk, 2001). These types of events stand out from the ordinary course of events, interrupting the normal course of life and causing destabilisation; they require a change in daily functioning, create emotional tension and often give life a new purpose as well as a new form (Beisert, 2000).

As a result of experiencing a difficult, critical life event, one may predominantly feel the negative impact of such an event on fundamental beliefs about the self, the system of values or meaning of life (Zięba, Wawrzyniak, and Świrkula, 2010). However, a person who has already gone through a critical life event may also experience positive changes that occur as a result of the struggle. Positive changes appear as a result of starting a remedial processes and they are referred to as the post-traumatic growth. As a result of actions aimed at solving the crisis, an increase in the sense of personal strength, agency and efficiency can be observed, together with greater confidence in one's competence and the ability to set new goals and challenges. In addition, the individual begins to appreciate their relationships with other people more – the relationships become closer and deeper and the level of openness and sensitivity to others increases. The post-traumatic growth is a multidimensional concept that is also manifested in the form of appreciation of life and an increase in its value, a change in the system of values as well as enrichment of spiritual life. Positive qualitative changes are an implication of the creative process of dealing with extremely difficult circumstances (Tedeschi, and Calhoun, 2004).

The post-traumatic growth occurs mainly on the basis of the cognitive engagement of an individual. Cognitive elaboration involves the use of reformulation strategies, rebuilding schemas and active searching for meaning, which purpose is to help an individual to adapt to a new situation. Therefore, the post-traumatic growth provides some additional value and the changes are transformational and qualitative in nature (Tedeschi, and Calhoun, 1996, 2004). The very term “post-traumatic growth” could suggest that only people who survive a traumatic event can experience it; however, according to the authors (Tedeschi, and Calhoun, 2004), the post-traumatic growth refers to positive psychological changes that occur as a result of

struggling with life circumstances that prove challenging for an individual. Undoubtedly, the post-traumatic growth deals with events of seismic proportions which temporarily become a prism for interpretation of reality, a global point of reference. Zięba and his collaborators (Zięba, Wawrzyniak, and Świrkula, 2010) treat the concepts of trauma and crisis as synonymous; moreover, they study the intensity and direction of changes in functioning that occur as a result of experiencing various critical life events.

According to research results, the effectiveness of coping with such difficult, critical event as divorce varies (e.g. Amato, 2000, 2010; Crane, 2002; Hetherington, 2003; Perrig-Chiello, Hutchison, and Morselli, 2015; Walsh, 2003b). The functioning of some people after divorce fits well with the crisis model described by Amato (2010). However, there is a divorced group whose life after divorce is characterised rather as persistent distress, described in the chronic strain model. According to this model, stress experienced in connection with divorce is of chronic nature (Amato, 2000). Demo and Fine (2010), in regard to the diverse modes of social and emotional adaptation of adults after divorce, state that numerous studies support the chronic strain model. Many studies indicate that divorce is associated with deterioration of health, an increase in psychological and physical disorders, lower self-esteem or a decrease in well-being (Kiecolt-Glaser et al., 1987; Myers, 2005; Symoens et al., 2014). The decrease in well-being is associated with the deterioration of a standard of living after divorce, weakening of the social support network and a lower level of experienced closeness (Baitar et al., 2012; Kołodziej-Zaleska, and Przybyła-Basista, 2016; Plopa, and Makarowski, 2010); however, the research results are not conclusive. Some researchers (cf. e.g. Symoens et al., 2014) pay particular attention to improving mental health after experiencing of such a critical life event as divorce. Positive changes mainly concern the increase in the level of self-esteem and personal control (Symoens et al., 2014). According to other studies, people after divorce experience a sense of personal growth, greater autonomy and improved well-being (Baitar et al., 2012).

It seems that the one-dimensional approach to the reactions arising in response to such critical event as divorce is too simplistic (see Bonanno, 2008; Demo, and Fine, 2010). Demo and Fine (2010) emphasise the diversity of experiences related to, inter alia, the adaptation process after divorce. Divorce is not any episode, but rather a process that often begins much earlier than at the moment a petition for divorce is filed, and continues long after dissolution of marriage, particularly if divorced parties have children (Coleman, Ganong, and Leon, 2006). From a psychological point of view, the divorce process is a complex and multi-stage phenomenon that is not limited in time to divorce proceedings (Przybyła-Basista, 2006). In addition to having multiple stages, divorce is also multi-dimensional since it affects every aspect of life. The best illustration of multidimensionality of divorce is the concept of Bohannon (1970; see also: Beisert, 2000; Coleman, Ganong, and Leon, 2006; Przybyła-Basista, 2006), who distinguished six stages (or rather spheres) of divorce: emotional, legal, parental, economic, social and mental. In general, two of them can be considered as stages in a strict sense. These are emotional divorce and mental divorce. The emotional divorce concerns the

beginning of separation of partners: positive feelings and joint initiatives disappear; there is a sense of hurt, anger, anxiety, loss, loneliness; one or both parties start to seek help from friends and family (Bohannon, 1970; Coleman, Ganong, and Leon, 2006; Przybyła-Basista, 2006). In turn, the mental divorce is intrapersonal in nature and involves reconstruction of one's own identity, an increase in self-esteem and making plans for the future. This is the most important sphere of divorce – the condition for coping with the divorce and a tool for assessing its effectiveness (Beisert, 2000). Being in the stage of mental divorce can be equated with experiencing a positive life change because there is an increase in energy, acceptance and trust in oneself, a feeling of satisfaction with the new lifestyle and perception of oneself as an autonomous person, completely independent of the former spouse (Przybyła-Basista, 2006). It should be noted that this understanding of that stage of divorce is similar to the definition of post-traumatic growth.

Between these two stages lies a whole spectrum of tasks that both divorcing and divorced people have to face. Legal divorce involves making divorce legally valid. Paradoxically, giving legal status to private problems exacerbates the crisis. The spouses become trial opponents; their positions are most frequently polarised (Bohannon, 1970; Coleman, Ganong, and Leon, 2006; Przybyła-Basista, 2006). Court proceedings are often continued after the dissolution of marriage and they most often revolve around guardianship matters or division of property. These issues are often associated with high levels of stress, a sense of loss of control and injustice. Parental divorce does not entail breaking the bond with the child, but it means the termination of the existing form of relationship and contact with the child. As Beisert (2000) notes, separating the contact with the ex-partner from the contact with children is extremely divorce-specific. Furthermore, it is the most difficult part of change regarding the form of the relationship with the ex-spouse. In the case of divorce, it becomes necessary to redefine one's role as a parent. During the stage when a "guardian parent" is determined, the child's place of residence and the type of care are determined as well. In addition, contacts with a "non-guardian parent" (i.e. the one who does not look after the child on a daily basis) are put on a schedule. Divorcing and divorced people who become the "non-guardian parent" may experience a sense of loneliness and a loss of the bond with children, whereas people who are the "guardian parent" may feel overburdened with responsibilities. Economic divorce includes changes in the financial situation of divorced persons and mainly concerns the division of property of former spouses. It is very important because, as numerous studies indicate, the economic situation of people after divorce, especially women (who usually become the "guardian parents"), is characterised by a decrease in the material standard of living (cf. Crane, 2002), and divorce itself is almost always associated with impoverishment (Beisert, 2000). Social divorce encompasses the changes that take place among friends and acquaintances of former spouses; it also includes the issue of the divorced individuals' dealing with the reactions of the environment. Divorced people may experience loneliness, sadness and despair due to the disloyalty of their friends (Przybyła-Basista, 2006). The immediate environment of divorcing/

divorced people may be reluctant to participate in the conflict or take sides. Furthermore, the change in marital status complicates earlier social life which often comprised of meetings of married couples with other ones (Beisert, 2000; Coleman, Ganong, and Leon, 2006).

Bohannon's concept is extremely useful in identifying tasks that divorcing and divorced people face. At the same time, it helps to understand the feelings they experience. It is also useful in becoming aware of the number of changes that divorced parties experience in many spheres of life, often simultaneously (Przybyła-Basista, 2006). Analysing subsequent spheres of divorce, it can be stated that divorce is an event of great magnitude: it requires changes in daily functioning, destabilises the status quo, disorganises habitual actions and causes significant emotional tension (Amato, 2000, 2010; Beisert, 2000; Błażek, and Lewandowska-Walter, 2017; Demo, and Fine, 2010). That is why, it constitutes a crisis (or a critical life event) and embodies everything that is associated with crisis: it can pose a risk of dysfunction, but it can also give a chance for positive development (Beisert, 2000; Błażek, and Lewandowska-Walter, 2017). An interesting question arises whether the size and nature of changes experienced after divorce, as well as the way they are perceived, are associated with experiencing either positive or negative changes in daily functioning – changes in: the sphere of values and meaning of life, the sense of personal strength, depth of relationships with other people, etc., that arise as a result of experiencing the divorce crisis.

## 2. Methods

**Aim of the study.** The aim of this study is to examine whether the assessment of the impact of divorce on specific spheres of life (such as: standard of living, housing situation, health condition, work, the relationship with children, family, a former spouse and their family/friends) is associated with different levels of experiencing positive or negative life changes. The concept of the life change in this research indicates the direction and intensity of changes in the functioning of individuals burdened with a critical life event, i.e. divorce. At the same time, it was assumed that for most people, divorce involves experiencing a crisis or a breakthrough in life. Experiencing positive changes may indicate the ability to cope with critical life events, such as divorce. On the other hand, negative changes show that divorced people experience the negative impact of marriage dissolution on different spheres of life as well as on fundamental beliefs about themselves, their values and meaning of their life.

**Study group.** 157 divorced individuals, aged between 24 and 71 years old, participated in the study. The average age of respondents was approximately 41 years. Three out of four participants were women ( $n = 120$ ); a quarter of the group comprised of men ( $n = 37$ ). More than half of the respondents (slightly more than 52%) were parents who, after divorce, took care of children on a daily basis. Slightly more than 60% of the respondents had final

termination of divorce proceedings (concerning alimony, child custody or division of property) and almost 40% of the studied individuals were in the midst of their divorce proceedings. A little over half of the respondents (52%) changed their place of residence after divorce and slightly less than half (almost 47%) of the studied individuals still lived in the same place as before divorce. Approximately 50% of the respondents have not entered any new relationship after divorce. Less than a third (32%) of the studied people declared that they remained in a new relationship, whereas almost a fifth (18%) of the respondents remarried. The vast majority of the respondents described their financial situation after divorce as “average” (almost 40%) or “good” (almost 40% as well). Approximately 10% of the respondents described their financial situation as “very good.” However, almost 12% of the respondents assessed their financial situation after divorce as “bad,” and a small percentage of the studied individuals as “very bad.”

**Course of the study.** The research was conducted in Poland, in cooperation with family diagnostic and consultation centres, psychological and pedagogical counselling centres as well as other institutions helping children and families. Study participants received a set of writing tools (an envelope with a sheet of paper and a pencil). After having filled the questionnaires, the envelope was sealed for anonymity and confidentiality. All respondents had been informed that the study was completely voluntary and anonymous; they could also withdraw at any given time. The participants also received written instructions explaining the purpose of the study, introducing the researcher and highlighting the anonymous aspect of the study.

**Research tools.** The following tools were used in the study:

- 1) Life Changes Scale (LCS) (Zięba, Wawrzyniak, and Świrkula, 2010) – used to measure changes in the functioning of a person with suspected post-traumatic growth as a result of experiencing a critical life event. The scale also enables to study the absence of changes or absence of negative changes in the sphere of fundamental beliefs and self-evaluation. The instrument consists of 19 items; an exploratory (EFA) and confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) confirmed its single-factor structure; Cronbach's alpha values range from .74 to .90. The scale has high theoretical validity. It is possible to modify the instruction to refer to a specific stress-inducing situation; in this study the instruction was modified. The participants responded to questions related to their divorce.
- 2) A short scale regarding the assessment of the impact of divorce on particular spheres of life. Respondents assess how they perceive the impact of divorce on specific spheres of their life. The scale is used to assess whether they have experienced improvement, deterioration or no change in a particular sphere. These particular spheres are: standard of living, housing situation, health condition, work, relationship with children, relations with one's own family, the ex-spouse and their family, relations with friends.
- 3) A survey collecting socio-demographic data and data related to the context of divorce.

**Directions of the statistical analyses.** A statistical analysis was conducted using the PS Imago programme (SPSS for Windows 25.0). One-factor Anova was used to assess the significance of intergroup differences. Multiple post-hoc comparisons were performed using the Scheffé's method. Spearman's rho coefficient was used to assess the strength of the relationship between variables.

### 3. Results

(I) Firstly, analyses of intercorrelations were performed in order to verify mutual relations between the following variables:

- experiencing a life change as a result of divorce,
- the assessment of the impact of divorce on particular spheres of life.

The results of the analyses are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1.**

*Table of intercorrelations between experiencing a life change as a result of divorce and the assessment of the impact of divorce on particular spheres of life*

|                                      | Life change <sup>1</sup> | Standard of living | Housing situation | Health condition | Work   | Relationship with children | Relationship with one's own family | Relationship with ex-spouse | Relationship with ex-spouse's family | Relationship with friends |
|--------------------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------|-------------------|------------------|--------|----------------------------|------------------------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------------------------|---------------------------|
| Life change <sup>1</sup>             | –                        | .432**             | .418**            | .510**           | .247** | .312**                     | .131                               | .001                        | .060                                 | .202*                     |
| Standard of living                   | .432**                   | –                  | .587**            | .501**           | .529** | .293**                     | .132                               | .064                        | -.012                                | .220**                    |
| Housing situation                    | .418**                   | .587**             | –                 | .362**           | .350** | .269**                     | .108                               | .006                        | .015                                 | .136                      |
| Health condition                     | .510**                   | .501**             | .362**            | –                | .493** | .467**                     | .277**                             | -.005                       | .017                                 | .180*                     |
| Work                                 | .247**                   | .529**             | .350**            | .493**           | –      | .290**                     | .146                               | .030                        | .064                                 | .087                      |
| Relationship with children           | .312**                   | .293**             | .269**            | .467**           | .290** | –                          | .342**                             | .135                        | .034                                 | .114                      |
| Relationship with one's own family   | .131                     | .132               | .108              | .277**           | .146   | .342**                     | –                                  | -.174*                      | -.155                                | .299**                    |
| Relationship with ex-spouse          | .001                     | .064               | .006              | -.005            | .030   | .135                       | -.174*                             | –                           | .445**                               | -.040                     |
| Relationship with ex-spouse's family | .060                     | -.012              | .015              | .017             | .064   | .034                       | -.155                              | .445**                      | –                                    | -.002                     |
| Relationship with friends            | .202*                    | .220**             | .136              | .180*            | .087   | .114                       | .299**                             | -.040                       | -.002                                | –                         |

\*\* Correlation significance of .001. \* Correlation significance of .05.

<sup>1</sup> The notion of "life change" indicates a direction and intensity of changes in daily functioning experienced as a result of a critical life event – divorce.

The presented data indicate the existence of significant correlations between experiencing a life change as a result of divorce and the assessment of the impact of divorce on: standard of living, housing situation, health condition, work, relationship with children and friends – these are positive correlations of weak or medium strength. They should be understood as follows: higher magnitude of positive change in functioning after divorce is associated with the assessment of the positive impact of divorce on the standard of living, housing situation, health condition, work, the relationship with children and friends (in other words, with perceiving improvement in these areas of life). Relationships of the experienced life change with the assessment of the impact of divorce on other types of interpersonal relations (i.e. with one's own family, with the ex-spouse or their family) turned out to be statistically insignificant.

A more detailed analysis of the intercorrelation table enables to see statistically significant relationships occurring among the assessments of the impact of divorce on individual spheres of life. In general, the assessments of the impact of divorce on the standard of living, housing situation, health condition, work and the relationship with children remain interrelated. The higher the rating in one of these areas is, the higher it is in the subsequent area; the lower the rating in one of these areas is, the lower it is in the subsequent one. There are also statistically significant correlations of the same nature among the assessment of the impact of divorce on relationships with one's own family and children, as well as with friends and the ex-spouse. Only in the latter case is the relationship inverse, i.e. the greater the improvement in relations with one's family after divorce is, the greater is the deterioration of relations with the ex-spouse; the greater the improvement in relations with the ex-spouse is, the greater is the deterioration of relations with one's own family. The assessment of the impact of divorce on relations with the ex-spouse also correlates with the assessment of the impact of divorce on relations with their family, but it is a positive correlation – as in the case of the vast majority of the correlations analysed – i.e. the more positive the assessment of the impact of divorce on relations with the ex-spouse is, the more positive is the assessment of the impact of divorce on relations with their family.

(II) Subsequently, intergroup comparisons were made to verify whether and how the magnitude of the life change experienced as a result of the divorce crisis depends on the assessment of the impact of divorce on individual spheres of life.

When assessing the impact of divorce on standard of living, the significance of the test was  $F = 17.6$ ;  $df = 2$ ;  $p < .0001$ . The data have shown that people who reported deterioration of their standard of living after divorce or no change in this area, experienced lower magnitude of positive life change when compared to those who observed improvement in their standard of living after divorce. The detailed results are presented in Table 2.

**Table 2.**

*Differences in the magnitude of experienced life change after divorce in individuals differently assessing the impact of divorce on the standard of living*

| Standard of living |               | Life change difference in mean values (first column – second column) | SD          | p            | CI95%                        |
|--------------------|---------------|--|-------------|--------------|------------------------------|
| Deterioration      | No change     | -5.62  | 2.34        | .059         | <-11.40; .17>                |
|                    | Improvement   | <b>-12.45</b>  | <b>2.10</b> | <b>.0001</b> | <b>&lt;-17.63; -7.26&gt;</b> |
| No change          | Deterioration | 5.62   | 2.34        | .059         | <-.17; 11.40>                |
|                    | Improvement   | <b>-6.83</b>   | <b>2.35</b> | <b>.016</b>  | <b>&lt;-12.64; 1.02&gt;</b>  |
| Improvement        | Deterioration | 12.45  | 2.10        | .0001        | <7.26; 17.63>                |
|                    | No change     | 6.83   | 2.35        | .016         | <1.02; 12.64>                |

In the case of the assessment of the impact of divorce on the housing situation, the significance of the test was  $F = 17.86$ ;  $df = 2$ ;  $p < .0001$ . The results have shown that all of the particular groups differ from one another. People who declared the deterioration of the housing situation after divorce experienced lower magnitude of positive life change in comparison to people who either saw an improvement in their standard of living after divorce or saw no change in this sphere. On the other hand, people who observed no change in this sphere had lower magnitude of experienced life change than people who reported improvement of their housing situation after divorce. Detailed data are presented in Table 3.

**Table 3.**

*Differences in the magnitude of experienced life change after divorce in individuals differently assessing the impact of divorce on the housing situation*

| Housing situation |               | Life change difference in mean values (first column – second column) | SD   | p            | CI95%                        |
|-------------------|---------------|--|------|--------------|------------------------------|
| Deterioration     | No change     | <b>-8.68</b>   | 2.23 | <b>.001</b>  | <-14.19; -3.17>              |
|                   | Improvement   | <b>-14.69</b>  | 2.47 | <b>.0001</b> | <b>&lt;-20.79; -8.59&gt;</b> |
| No change         | Deterioration | 8.68   | 2.23 | .001         | <3.17; 14.19>                |
|                   | Improvement   | <b>-6.01</b>   | 2.14 | <b>.021</b>  | <b>&lt;-11.31; -.72&gt;</b>  |
| Improvement       | Deterioration | 14.69  | 2.47 | .0001        | <8.59; 20.79>                |
|                   | No change     | 6.01   | 2.14 | .021         | <.72; 11.31>                 |

Considering the assessment of the impact of divorce on the health condition, the significance of the test was  $F = 26.61$ ;  $df = 2$ ;  $p < .0001$ . The data have shown that all of the particular groups differ from each other. People who reported deterioration in the health condition after divorce experienced lower magnitude of positive life change when compared to people who either saw improvement in health after divorce or observed no change in this sphere. On the other hand, people who declared no change in the health condition after divorce had lower magnitude of experienced life change than people who saw improvement in this sphere. Detailed results are presented in Table 4.

**Table 4.**

*Differences in the magnitude of experienced life change after divorce in individuals differently assessing the impact of divorce on health*

| Health condition |               | Life change difference in mean values (first column – second column) | SD   | <i>p</i>     | CI95%            |
|------------------|---------------|--|------|--------------|------------------|
| Deterioration    | No change     | <b>-6.68</b>   | 2.24 | <b>.013</b>  | <-12.22; -1.14>  |
|                  | Improvement   | <b>-16.02</b>  | 2.26 | <b>.0001</b> | <-21.60; -10.44> |
| No change        | Deterioration | 6.68   | 2.24 | .013         | <1.14; 12.22>    |
|                  | Improvement   | <b>-9.34</b>   | 1.99 | <b>.0001</b> | <-14.26; -4.42>  |
| Improvement      | Deterioration | 16.02  | 2.26 | .0001        | <10.44; 21.560>  |
|                  | No change     | 9.34   | 1.99 | .0001        | <4.42; 14.26>    |

In the case of the assessment of the impact of divorce on work, the significance of the test was  $F = 8.40$ ;  $df = 2$ ;  $p < .0001$ . The data have shown that people who declared a negative impact of divorce on their work or observed no change in this sphere experienced lower magnitude of positive life change in comparison to people who saw the positive impact of divorce on their work. Detailed results are presented in Table 5.

**Table 5.**

*Differences in the magnitude of experienced life change after divorce in individuals differently assessing the impact of divorce on work*

| Work          |               | Life change difference in mean values (first column – second column) | SD   | <i>P</i>     | CI95%           |
|---------------|---------------|--|------|--------------|-----------------|
| Deterioration | No change     | <b>-8.19</b>   | 2.72 | <b>.012</b>  | <-14.92; -1.46> |
|               | Improvement   | <b>-12.32</b>  | 3.01 | <b>.0001</b> | <-19.76; -4.88> |
| No change     | Deterioration | 8.19   | 2.72 | .012         | <1.46; 14.92>   |
|               | Improvement   | -4.13  | 2.18 | .171         | <-9.52; 1.27>   |
| Improvement   | Deterioration | 12.32  | 3.01 | .0001        | <4.88; 19.76>   |
|               | No change     | 4.13   | 2.18 | .171         | <-1.27; 9.52>   |

In the case of the impact of divorce on the relationship with children, the significance of the test was  $F = 7.33$ ;  $df = 2$ ;  $p < .001$ . The results have shown that people who declared an improvement in their relationship with children after divorce experienced greater magnitude of positive life change when compared to people who either observed deterioration in the relationship with children after divorce or saw no change in this area. Detailed data are presented in Table 6.

**Table 6.**

*Differences in the magnitude of experienced life change after divorce in individuals differently assessing the impact of divorce on the relationship with children*

| Relationship with children |               | Life change difference in mean values (first column – second column) | SD   | p           | CI95%           |
|----------------------------|---------------|--|------|-------------|-----------------|
| Deterioration              | No change     | -2.35  | 2.63 | .672        | <-8.86; 4.16>   |
|                            | Improvement   | -9.27  | 2.67 | .003        | <-15.88; -2.66> |
| No change                  | Deterioration | 2.35   | 2.63 | .672        | <-4.16; 8.86>   |
|                            | Improvement   | -6.92  | 2.30 | .013        | <-12.63; -1.21> |
| Improvement                | Deterioration | <b>9.27</b>  | 2.67 | <b>.003</b> | <2.66; 15.88>   |
|                            | No change     | <b>6.92</b>  | 2.30 | <b>.013</b> | <1.21; 12.63>   |

There were no differences among particular groups regarding the magnitude of life change as a result of divorce, when the following factors were taken into consideration:

- 1) Different assessment of the impact of divorce on the relationship with one's family ( $F= 1.20$ ;  $df = 2$ ;  $p = .14$ ).
- 2) Different assessment of the impact of divorce on the relationship with the ex-spouse ( $F= .96$ ;  $df = 2$ ;  $p = .38$ ).
- 3) Different assessment of the impact of divorce on the relationship with the ex-spouse's family ( $F= .59$ ;  $df = 2$ ;  $p = .56$ ).

However, there were differences in the magnitude of life change when the assessment of the impact of divorce on the relationships with friends was taken into account. The significance of the test was  $F = 4.10$ ;  $df = 2$ ;  $p < .018$ . Detailed data are presented in Table 7.

**Table 7.**

*Differences in the magnitude of experienced life change after divorce in individuals differently assessing the impact of divorce on the relationship with friends*

| Relationship with friends |               | Life change difference in mean values (first column – second column) | SD   | P           | CI95%          |
|---------------------------|---------------|--|------|-------------|----------------|
| Deterioration             | No change     | 1.60   | 4.14 | .929        | <-8.65; 11.84> |
|                           | Improvement   | -4.66  | 4.35 | .565        | <-15.42; 6.11> |
| No change                 | Deterioration | -1.60  | 4.14 | .929        | <-11.84; 8.65> |
|                           | Improvement   | -6.25  | 2.18 | .018        | <-11.65; -.85> |
| Improvement               | Deterioration | 4.66   | 4.35 | .565        | <-6.11; 15.42> |
|                           | No change     | <b>6.25</b>  | 2.18 | <b>.018</b> | <.85; 11.65>   |

The results have shown differences only in the case of people who declared improvement in the relationship with friends after divorce and those who declared no change in this sphere. People who reported the positive impact of divorce on relationships with friends experienced greater magnitude of positive life change in comparison to people who did not observe the impact of divorce in this sphere.

## 4. Discussion

The results of statistical analyses presented above indicate divergence among divorced people as to the life change experienced as a result of a difficult, critical life event, i.e. divorce. Simultaneously, the data obtained show the interrelationships between the experience of life change and the assessment of changes that have taken place in divorced people regarding different spheres of life, as a result of divorce.

The life change indicates the direction and intensity of changes in functioning, resulting from the struggle with life circumstances that pose a great challenge for an individual. This type of life circumstances – crises or difficult, critical life events – affect the following areas of functioning: the beliefs one holds about the value and sense of life, the sense of personal strength, the depth of relationships with other people, the system of values and enrichment of the spiritual life (Zięba, Wawrzyniak, and Świrkula, 2010). Hence a positive psychological change concerns fundamental beliefs related to the self as well as the value and meaning of life (Zięba, Wawrzyniak, and Świrkula, 2010); it is also referred to as the post-traumatic growth (Tedeschi, and Calhoun, 2004) which can be psychological, spiritual or metaphysical in nature. This research proves a diversified experience of divorce among divorced people. However, this diversity is related to another type of changes: those that occur in daily, post-divorce reality and which are strongly associated with the wide spectrum of changes experienced by people going through the crisis of divorce. Economic, legal, parental or social divorces reveal the enormity of changes affecting almost each area of life of a divorced person (cf. Bohannan, 1970; Coleman, Ganong, and Leon, 2006; Przybyła-Basista, 2006). Actual changes related to divorce seem to be an indispensable element of the of post-divorce reality. Referring to the concept of Bohannan (1970), it can be said that the changes occur most intensely in the area of the socioeconomic status, financial and housing issues, work and health condition, as well as in the area of relationships with the family and environment.

The main purpose of the study was to verify whether there is a relationship between these, roughly speaking, two types of changes: life change (that can be psychological or metaphysical) and the change(s) in daily reality of people after divorce. The most visible (both in correlation analyses and in intergroup comparisons) were the relationships between experiencing a positive life change after the divorce and the objective aspects, such as: standard of living, housing situation, work or health condition. It has turned out that people who assess the impact of divorce on the above-mentioned spheres positively experience higher magnitude of positive life change. It means that those people were more convinced of the value and sense of life and after divorce they experienced an increase in personal strength, depth of relationships with other people, a reformulation of the value system and enrichment of spiritual life. It seems that socioeconomic factors, living conditions and health aspects constitute a *sine qua non* for the post-traumatic growth experienced after a difficult event. These factors form a base, a starting

point for overcoming the divorce crisis. They are crucial especially in the case of divorce since families often face financial difficulties as a result of divorce (see Crane, 2002). Economic status is defined as one of the most important risk factors in the process of adapting to changes after divorce (Demo and Fine, 2010); this refers particularly to women who raise children alone (cf. Kołodziej-Zaleska, and Ilska, 2017). Simultaneously, many studies indicate the relationship between good adaptation to the divorce and sociodemographic variables: standard of living, employment or education (Gaffal, 2010; Perrig-Chiello, Hutchison, and Morselli, 2015; Thiriot, and Buckner, 1992). Economic and social aspects may be associated not only with good functioning, but also with experiencing the post-traumatic growth. Other studies show that divorced women exhibit greater independence, self-confidence, new professional competences and greater work achievements in comparison to the situation from before divorce (Hatherington, 1993; Hetherington, and Kelly, 2002; Kitson, 1992; Walsh, 2003b). These aspects form the basis for assessing life after divorce as satisfactory. Good socioeconomic status is predominantly associated with good health. Many studies indicate that divorce weakens health in all possible spheres (Symoens et al. 2014) and is associated with an increase in the number of psychological and physical disorders (Clarke-Stewart, and Brentano, 2006; Kiecolt-Glaser et al., 1987). These results are confirmed by the conducted analyses: people who negatively assessed the impact of divorce on their functioning in the sphere of health found themselves in the worst life situation. Those people experienced low intensity of positive life change, or even negative change, after divorce.

Positive life change is also related to a sense of deep interpersonal relationship after experiencing a critical event. Studies addressing the issue of positive changes after divorce indicate improvement in interpersonal relationships and greater satisfaction with the role of a parent after divorce (Hatherington, 1993; Hetherington, and Kelly, 2002; Kitson, 1992; Walsh, 2003b). In this research, the relationships between a positive life change and a positive assessment of the impact of divorce on relationships with children, as well as relationships with friends, seem clear. On the other hand, the differences in intensity of the experienced life change were insignificant regarding assessments of relations with one's own family, with the ex-spouse and with the ex-spouse's family. Seeing the improvement in the relationship with children can be key to experiencing a positive change after divorce. Many parents are convinced that the model of an intact family is the only possibility for proper development of children (see Kołodziej-Zaleska, and Przybyła-Basista, 2018). Divorce is seen as the greatest wrongdoing caused to children, which, in turn, results in difficulties in dealing with guilt and failure. Improvement of the relationship with children after divorce may be helpful in releasing oneself from this belief by making cognitive reformulation that is extremely important for experiencing any positive life change or post-traumatic growth (Tedeschi, and Calhoun, 1996, 2004).

The lack of differentiation in the experienced life change (accompanied by different assessments of the relations with the ex-spouse) may, in turn, be associated with coping with one of the key tasks that a person after divorce faces, namely: the termination of emotional relationship with the ex-spouse (see Przybyła-Basista, 2006), as well as with the end of the stages of grief after divorce (Power, 1996) and with the weakening of the attachment to the ex-spouse (Kitson, 1982). A positive life change in functioning would not be possible without a closure of the previous stages of divorce. Therefore, lack of differences does not seem strange: it is not essential for experiencing positive changes in one's beliefs about themselves as well as about others and the world whether divorce affected the relationship with the former spouse positively or negatively.

The assessment of relations with one's own family and family of the former spouse was also insignificant. However, the results have shown the existence of quite simple interrelations. Good relations with one's ex-spouse are connected with good relations with their family; this result seems very logical. It can be important for the nature and quality of the contacts between the other parent and their family (e.g. the grandparents) with children. The result indicating the inverse relationship between the assessment of the impact of divorce on the relationship with one's own family and the assessment of the impact of divorce on the relations with one's ex-spouse also seems interesting. Improvement in relations with the former spouse is associated with deterioration in relations with one's own family, whereas the improvement in relations with one's family is associated with the deterioration of relations with the former spouse. This result indicates complexity and ambiguity of interpersonal relationships after divorce. The immediate environment of divorced people may often not want to choose between the one or the other, but may also feel a certain urge to polarise positions. Regardless of the explanation, any tendency on the part of both close and distant friends to separate from people after divorce causes that experiencing divorce becomes even more lonely, full of suffering and anger (Coleman, Ganong, and Leon, 2006). This research confirms that the highest magnitude of positive life change in daily functioning is experienced by people who notice improvement in relations with friends after divorce. This is an additional voice in the discussion on the importance of social support in the pre- and post-divorce situation (Clarke-Stewart, and Brentano, 2006; Gaffal, 2010; Kołodziej-Zaleska, and Przybyła-Basista, 2016).

In this study, attention was paid primarily to the subjective aspect of changes experienced in various areas of life. The respondents assessed how their divorce affected their standard of living, housing situation, health condition and work, their relationships with children and their own family, their relations with friends, the ex-spouse and the ex-spouse's family. In general, it can be concluded that the perception of improvement and positive impact of divorce on those particular spheres was mostly associated with experiencing the positive life change. The results are congruent with the statement that perception and understanding of one's life situation after divorce facilitates finding a progressive solution to the crisis of divorce (McKenry, Price, 1994).

According to Amato (2000), the perception and definition of a divorce crisis affects the magnitude of stress experienced; similarly to resources, the perception can reduce it facilitating post-divorce adaptation. However, people experiencing chronic stress (i.e. constant experiencing of overburdening associated with economic difficulties, a sense of loneliness or excessive parental responsibility) never regain the same level of well-being after divorce (Amato, 2000) and often struggle with a negative life change. Sbarra and Emery (2015) believe that positive adaptation after experiencing significant adversities connected with divorce – one which enables a divorced person to return to the previous level of functioning or even attain better well-being – is a rule rather than an exception. However, the obtained results are not conclusive. Sakraida (2005) lists the resources that appear in response to the divorce crisis. These are: the ability to give meaning, finding a goal and solace. Given the emotional and psychological aspects of functioning, i.a. a sense of relief, growth, development and maturity can be listed (Buehler, 1987). The presented studies confirm the occurrence of a positive life change after experiencing a divorce crisis, but also indicate that the intensity of this change is associated with a different assessment of real aspects of daily life, on which divorce undoubtedly has a huge impact.

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