

*Once upon a time, a decade ago,  
Two families found a way to go  
Through life with pain, or else with gain,  
Despite being almost the same.*

*“There's not much we can do, except be tossed  
Hither and thither, and hope what we've lost  
Can be recouped, just a little bit.  
That's sufficient, more than a whit.*

*So said the one, whom we'll call **Doubt**.  
They piqued the interest of the family **About**.  
**Doubt** was skeptical, a powerless clan.  
**About** was determined, a strong woman and man.*

*“Disability motivates. It's our spur.  
It causes change in us and in her.  
Our daughter's world is different in kind.  
But some skills we have, and others we'll find.”*

*Said **Doubt**, power out of their range,*

*“You'd better accept things you cannot change.”  
Answered **About**, putting on armament,  
“We disagree. We're feeling empowerment.”*

*Over the years, **Doubt** never learned what to do,  
While **About** changed themselves and systems,  
too.*

***Doubt** took a road travelled by some few.  
**About** chose a path that has helped even you*

*With doctors and teachers **About** raised their  
voice,*

*“Work with us! Please honour our choice!”  
And as they lived in their little town,  
Strengthening ties began to abound*

*Neighbours and friends, and clergymen too,  
All quickly learned what they could do.  
They surrounded **About** with their generosity,  
Providing a different social security.*

## Family Empowerment

In my very simple and none too elegant ditty lie most of the elements of the debate on empowerment. How useful is a poem **about** empowerment?

It has two uses. First, like many good poems, it distils the essence of a complex concept. After reading it, the reader *needs* to know nothing more. Second, it lends itself to analysis that further explains a complex concept. After reading the poem, the reader who *wants* to know more **about** the concept may dissect the poem and, by discovering nuances in it, achieve a deeper understanding. Here, I begin with the elementary and move to a more sophisticated understanding of empowerment.

### Two Different Approaches

Let's begin by considering the poem's two families. The **Doubt** and **About** families each have a child with a disability. There is where their similarities end, however.

**Doubt** is not motivated by the fact of disability. **About** is. **Doubt** accepts things pretty much as they are, content to be reactive. **About** acts on that motivation by identifying their resources and vowing to find others; they become proactive.

Choosing the path of least resistance, **Doubt** makes very little difference in their own family's life, much less in any other family's life. **About** opts for the more difficult path and thereby makes a powerful impact for themselves and others, too.

### Elements of Empowerment

The essential elements of empowerment are present in **About** but not in **Doubt**: *motivation*, plus *action* that uses inherent *skills*, develops other *resources*, and *impacts* one or more situations. Empowerment is also a *process*. **About** experiences empowerment immediately upon the birth of their daughter with a

disability. They achieved more of it, over the years, much as anyone acquires skills through a developmental process. “Once upon a time, a decade ago,” **About** took action, and continued to take it “over the years.”

Empowerment exists when the family *feels* that they can have some control over their lives. **About** said, “We’re seeking empowerment,” indicating they feel they can have some control over their lives.

Empowerment also consists of the *fact* that the family does achieve some mastery over some aspect of their lives. **About** took a path that helped themselves and “even you.”

### **The Responsive Context**

But a family is just one of the actors in the empowerment drama. In every family's life, there are many others. Even the family that feels the most empowered and takes the firmest action will find that it makes no difference unless others respond positively. Empowerment requires a *responsive context*. Thus, **About** said to providers, “Work with us! Please honour our choice!” Obviously, the providers listened to them: “**About** changed themselves and systems, too.” By changing systems, **About** “chose a path that has helped even you.” In short, they created a responsive context for themselves and for others as well.

*Thus, empowerment is a purposeful developmental process aimed at helping a family gain mastery over its life and environments, consisting of motivation, skills, and resources, and causing changes in the family and in the systems with which it relates.*

### **Origins of Empowerment**

We still have more to learn. But we have to leave the poem's text. Like most analysts, we need to examine the context within which the poet wrote. Let's start by examining empowerment's origins.

Empowerment originates in political theory **about** democratic government. Government of, by, and for the people is the familiar phrase - one that asserts that the people by right have power over their governments.

Empowerment also derives from social programs of the early 1960s. These programs lived by the phrase “Power to the People” and embodied it in model cities and community action programs. Nowadays, politics of the right and the left both pay tribute to empowerment but advocate different strategies.

Empowerment finally reflects psychologists' efforts to help people be healthier and to cause their communities and public policy to respond more to their needs.

*Thus, empowerment derives from political theory, social programs, and policy reform proposals and from several disciplines. Accordingly, it is best understood when each of these perspectives is taken into account.*

### **Criticisms of Empowerment**

Good poetry deals artfully with important subjects. Certainly, no one (especially not I) would applaud this poem's artfulness. Let's move beyond form and style, however, and consider this potential criticism: yes, the poem addresses a significant issue but it does so in wrong-headed ways. Can that be said of this poem? Perhaps so, on two grounds, but both are without merit.

### **Families Already Have Power**

Some people object to the very term and concept of empowerment. They say that families already have “power” and that no policy or professional (in the disability field) can “give” them what they already have. We believe this view does not represent an accurate understanding of empowerment.

The fact of the matter is that by far the greatest numbers of families do have and feel that they have inherent power, motivation, skill, and potential for impact on systems that serve them and their children with

disabilities. The poem acknowledges this fact by featuring the **About** family. At the same time, some families lack those skills (but can develop them) or choose not to use them; that is the case with the **Doubt** family. Empowerment does not necessarily mean that someone has to give power to a family. That could be the case. It equally can be the case that a family, such as **Doubt**, takes the initiative to become more empowered

It is also true that most families have to share power with professionals. Sharing can be useful, or not, for the families. In sharing their lives and power, **About** changed themselves “and systems, too” The poem's message is clear: public policy should indeed foster shared decision-making between family and professional, and it should encourage family participation in policy and research activities.

### **Empowerment Research is Misguided**

Some also say that research on empowerment is misguided. Research on shared decision making and family/professional collaboration, they argue, legitimises power in professionals, whereas power should lie only or at least primarily in families. They also contend that empowerment research assumes families are dysfunctional and can best be understood only from a “deficit” perspective.

Again, we disagree. Research on the process, components, and impact of family empowerment does not assume that the families are dysfunctional or deficit based. Rather it assumes that families are indeed inherently strong (like **About**). Their empowerment behaviour (motivation, skills, and resources) is worthy of study. Only with study will we know how to increase empowering behavior in others and how empowering behaviour makes the families' worlds more responsive. These worlds include the formal service systems and the informal or other mediating structures, such as religious, community, or other groups. Thus research about families in context is desirable; and research about systems change is, too.

Indeed, too much research already has examined families’ “deficits/pathology/ brokenness.” True, we need to understand what causes them stress and how to help them cope.

But even more, we need to know why **About** approaches life with a sense of purpose and strength (“But some skills we have, and others we'll find ... We're feeling empowerment.”) This is so because **About's** empowerment affects not just professionals but also “neighbours and friends, and clergymen too.” **About** affected their informal or mediating structures. And they did so in a most remarkable way: they evoked the generosity of others and thereby created a different kind of social security, a kind that no federal program can mandate.

Now, here at last is what we know and believe about empowerment, as exemplified by the poem:

- *Empowerment’s origins are in political theory, social programs, and policy - reform proposals, and its theoretical and research bases are in several disciplines*
- *Empowerment is a process whereby families recognize their own power and use it to gain more mastery over their environments.*
- *Accordingly, empowerment is best understood from a systems perspective, reflecting the fact that the family interacts with various environments.*
- *Empowerment exists when a family is able to combine its motivation with its own inherent or internal skills and with external resources and, by bringing the combination of motivation, skills and resources to bear on their environment, cause that environment to change.*

Thus, empowerment warrants research of individuals, families, professionals, and other individuals in certain contexts. In the disability field, the usual context is the formal service provider system. Because

families do not relate to only that context, empowerment research should also focus on families' interactions with informal or mediating structures.

- Rud Turnbull ■

*family*

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### Abstract

This article leads off with a poem about two families called "Doubt" and "About", both of which have a child with a disability. Doubt is not motivated by the fact of disability (Doubt is reactive), while About is (and is therefore proactive), and therefore the essential elements of empowerment are present in About but not in Doubt. The article discusses what we know and believe about empowerment.

**Keyword: Families**