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Missing an angel. Expressions of grief over lost children as reflected in the archives and on the Internet.

Forty years ago it was not culturally accepted to mourn a stillborn child. At the hospital the parents should not see their child, were told to forget about their loss and not discuss it. Today mourning is encouraged and perceived as both natural and necessary. This paper discusses how expressions of grief are culturally bound and how attitudes to what are possible and not possible to articulate, how and in what way varies over time.

Personal web sites dedicated to children who died at birth are compared to and discussed in relation to photographs of dead children from the beginning of the 20th century. The resemblance between the photographs is striking as is the similarities between the web sites. The material from each category can thus be perceived as part of a particular genre with its' specific boundaries and possibilities. However, there is also a likeness between the old and the new material despite the fact they are separated by a hundred years.

The study of such an emotionally sensitive topic as the death and loss of a child is ethically difficult. How can and shall we as researchers handle situations and questions that can arise and how does it affect our results? A researcher is never only a researcher but also an individual with his or her own experiences, or lack of experiences, of the topic in question. This is a fact in all studies but becomes especially apparent when studying emotional practices and expressions. A factor of importance, both concerning the ethical implications and the researcher's reactions towards the material, is time: what are the methodological and personal consequences of working with old compared to new material?