

BREEDING FOR MISCOMMUNICATION?

Anthropocentric breed selection may have hampered the ability of some types of commonly kept companion animals to communicate with people.

That is the theory put forward by Lauren Finka, a welfare specialist and postdoctoral researcher at Nottingham Trent University, at the Universities Federation for Animal Welfare conference last month (30 June).

Finka, who has researched facial diversity in cats, told delegates at the virtual event that selective breeding had altered some cats' faces so dramatically that it had become difficult to accurately read their expressions.

She said the rise in popularity of 'paedomorphic, or human infant-like' features in some companion species had potentially wreaked havoc with people's ability to accurately interpret these animals' internal emotional states. Examples of paedomorphic faces could include the faces of some brachycephalic dogs and cats.

In some cases, she said animals appeared to have been selected for facial features indicative of an emotional state of pain. Combined with the infant-like features, this meant some dogs' and cats' faces had

effectively come to resemble something akin to the face of a pained or emotionally distressed child.

'It's thought these sorts of paedomorphic features may trigger a nurturing response in humans, and they may actually be preferred, and, subsequently, these animals are more likely to be selected or adopted if they display these particular characteristics,' Finka said.

This theory appears to be partially supported by evidence gathered by Finka and two colleagues. When scored using the facial expressions aspect of a composite pain scale – a system used for measuring pain in animals – at various points before, during and after a surgical procedure, Scottish fold cats appeared to be in pain when they were not.

'Within our study we found certain brachy breeds, in particular Scottish fold cats, had facial pain scores that indicated a greater presence of pain-like features – even though, as far as we can ascertain, they weren't in pain,' Finka told delegates.

'So as well as being drawn to more infantile features, we also are drawn to features that may similarly indicate the need for us to provide care for individuals.'