According to Jill Morowski (1994) a liminal science is a science at the threshold ‘betwixt and between’ fixed conceptions. Picking up on this theme, this lecture will expand on the concept of liminality and its relevance for social psychologists who want to place concrete subjective experience in the cultural and historical context of changing social structures. The concept of liminality will be grounded in a transdisciplinary social psychology based on the process thought of G.H. Mead, amongst others. Starting with Mead’s ‘ontological liminality’ (based on his understanding of the nature of sociality), the lecture will go on to distinguish and juxtapose two other versions: a predominantly cultural account of liminality as passage between worlds, and a socio-structural account of liminality as transformation of worlds. Both accounts distinguish something like ‘structure’ from something like ‘event’, where ‘event’ points to an order of creation or emergent becoming. Liminality concerns the relationship between the two. The aim of this theoretical work is to contribute to a social psychology that can speak more directly to processes of change in a socio-political context characterised by ‘limbo’ and the experience of being ‘betwixt and between’. The lecture will therefore conclude with a discussion of the contemporary relevance of liminality under societal conditions that some have described as ‘permanent liminality’.

**Social psychology as a liminal field**

**Professor Paul Stenner**

*Chair in Social Psychology, The Open University*

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**Biography**

Paul Stenner is Professor of Social Psychology in the Department of Psychology, at the Open University where he also co-directs the Psychosocial Programme of the Centre for Citizenship, Identity and Governance. He holds a PhD in Psychology and Sociology from the University of Reading. His PhD work used Q methodology and thematic decomposition to study the social construction of jealousy.

He was formally Professor of Psychosocial Studies at the University of Brighton and has held Lectureships in Social Psychology at University College, London, The University of Bath, and the University of East London. He is a Fellow of the Academy of Social Sciences and a life-long Fellow of the Alexander von Humbolt Foundation. With the help of a Leverhulme Fellowship, he worked as a Humbolt Fellow in the Department of Law at the Goethe University of Frankfurt on a systems theoretical project outlining emotional dimensions of human rights discourse and practice.

More recently he has combined a growing theoretical interest in process thinking with a series of collaborative empirical projects on such problems as active ageing, the self-management of chronic back pain, the value and meaning of gardening and the home garden, experiences of ADHD, and the management of liminal experiences, and these projects have been variously
supported by funding from the Economic and Social Research Council, the Arts and Humanities Research Council, the National Institute for Health Research, The British Academy and the European Science Foundation. He has published widely in scientific journals representing a range of disciplines (including Psychology, Sociology, Cultural Studies, Philosophy, Human Rights, Geography and Systems Theory, Social Policy, Health and Medicine). He has published several books and is co-author with Steve Brown of Psychology without foundations (Sage, 2009) and with Monica Greco of The Emotions: a social science reader (Routledge, 2008). He is President Elect of the International Society for Theoretical Psychology and the Association for Process Thought and was a founder member of the Association for Psychosocial Studies.