



University  
of Victoria

Graduate Studies

Notice of the Final Oral Examination  
for the Degree of Master of Arts

of

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BA (Vancouver Island University, 2015)

**“What is a Refugee: An Ontological Exploration”**

Department of Sociology

Monday, December 10, 2018

1:00 P.M.

Cornett Building

Room A317

Supervisory Committee:

Dr. Peyman Vahabzadeh, Department of Sociology, University of Victoria (Supervisor)

Dr. Karen Kobayashi, Department of Sociology, UVic (Member)

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Dr. Frederick Grouzet, Department of Psychology, UVic

## **Abstract**

Refugee and migrant crises continue to make headlines, and coverage of these events varies on the perceived legitimacy of the displacements. Displaced people are referred to as refugees, economic migrants, or illegal immigrants, and these labels are used interchangeably. The use of these labels begets the question: what is a “refugee”? In this study, the label of “refugee” gets unpacked outside of the boundaries of legal definitions. Migrant and refugee research point towards a core ontology and epistemology of belonging, sedentarism, that informs migration policy in the Global North. The adherence to sedentarism as a mode of belonging results in migration being constructed as inherently problematic and dangerous. The participants in this study express that being/becoming a “refugee” is not a universal experience, but a collection of feelings that are present in response to the phenomenon of being/becoming a refugee. The feelings the participants describe are based on sedentarist conceptions of belonging, where citizenship and nationality are expressed as key concepts in the development of identity and belonging. This study argues that the value of this knowledge rests not within legal/political change, but within the social sphere. The “refugee” label, as a tool to create and drive policy, is a prescriptive tool that can only act given a specific representation of the world, therefore change needs to be located outside policy boundaries in order to transgress sedentarist ontologies. Thus, I present alternatives for reshaping contemporary ontological conceptions of belonging and highlight the work of social justice movements in rearticulating the concept of citizenship and belonging.