

PhD Program **GRADUATES**

SCHOOL OF SOCIAL WORK



RUTGERS UNIVERSITY

socialwork.rutgers.edu
New Brunswick, NJ, 08901



Dear Colleagues:

It is with great pride that I introduce to you our Rutgers School of Social Work PhD graduates. Our graduates have strong records of research, publications, and conference presentations. Their research, teaching, and practice expertise spans several domains and fields: *social support and reciprocity in refugee and immigrant communities, poverty & gender disparities, culturally relevant social work practice, impact of trauma on young adult well-being, military sexual trauma, educational attainment disparities, and social inequalities and older adult health*. They are a productive and talented group who are now in the process of pursuing employment as tenure-track faculty, postdoctoral scholars, and research faculty or affiliates.

Please feel free to reach out to them individually via the QR code to their web page if you would like to learn more about their background and interests. I am also happy to answer questions that you may have about the candidates and their areas of research and teaching. Please don't hesitate to contact me if you would like additional information at csimmel@ssw.rutgers.edu.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'C. Simmel'.

Cassandra Simmel, MSW, PhD

Director, PhD Program

Rutgers University School of Social Work

ALISHA CUPID, LCSW PhD CANDIDATE

Dissertation: *The climb towards equality: Examining women's empowerment in Trinidad and Tobago through a mixed methods study*



STATEMENT

Alisha Cupid is a PhD candidate in the School of Social Work at Rutgers University. She earned her Bachelor of Social Work with a minor in Psychology in 2011 and MSW from Tulane University in 2013. Alisha also earned a Graduate Certificate in International Social Work with an emphasis on women's poverty in Rwanda from Tulane University. During her time in Rwanda, she worked with Women for Women International doing independent research on women and childcare. Alisha is a licensed clinical social worker in the state of Louisiana. Upon completion of her degrees, she did direct practice with children and families, and populations involved with or affected by foster care, incarceration, homelessness, substance abuse, and with victims of crimes.

Her research interests were framed by these direct practice experiences and include gendered poverty in Sub-Saharan Africa and the Caribbean and women's empowerment. Alisha's dissertation is entitled *The climb toward equality: Examining women's empowerment in Trinidad and Tobago through a mixed methods study*. Her dissertation was partially funded by the American Association of University Women (AAUW), American Dissertation Fellowship for \$25,000. **Her research is focused on how women's poverty is experienced and how data collection and reduction policy can be improved using women's empowerment theory. Alisha has published several state reports for the Center for Prevention Science at Rutgers University** and substance abuse prevention publications. She has also taught Social Work Practice I: Practice with Individuals and Families in the MSW program at Rutgers University.



RESEARCH INTERESTS

- The intersectionality of international women's poverty and gender disparities
- Women's empowerment theory guided research
- Gendered poverty reduction policy



EDUCATION

Master of Social Work

Tulane University

Graduate Certificate in International Social Work

Tulane University

Bachelor of Social Work

New York University

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**GET TO KNOW
ALISHA**

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LORRAINE Y. HOWARD, PhD, LCSW, LCADC

Dissertation: *The development and validation of an instrument measuring clinician cultural humility*



STATEMENT

Lorraine Y. Howard, PhD, LCSW, LCADC earned her doctorate in Social Work from Rutgers University School of Social Work in May 2025, where she also completed her Bachelor of Arts and Master of Social Work degrees. She brings almost 30 years of extensive administrative and clinical experience in social work and addictions across diverse settings, including community corrections, hospitals, and both inpatient and outpatient substance use programs.

Her career has been shaped by a deep interest in the intersection of practice and research, particularly in understanding **how trauma impacts adolescent and young adult well-being, substance use, and how culturally responsive social work practices can improve outcomes for minoritized youth.**

Dr. Howard's dissertation centered on the development and validation of a clinician-centered measure of cultural humility, advancing research on therapeutic relationships, cultural responsiveness, and treatment outcomes. Her **ongoing research includes examining the validity of the scale across diverse populations and contexts**, as well as studying racism-based traumatic stress symptoms among youth. She has collaborated across disciplines, including her work with the Mental Health Equity Lab at The New School in New York City (now New York University), and serves as a Faculty Affiliate with the Center for Prevention Science at Rutgers University.

In addition to research, Dr. Howard has more than **a decade of teaching experience at both undergraduate and graduate levels**, instructing in foundational social work, clinical practice, and addictions through traditional, hybrid, intensive weekend, and online (synchronous and asynchronous) formats.



RESEARCH INTERESTS

- Culturally relevant social work practice
- Trauma
- Substance use
- Adolescent/young adult mental health and wellbeing



EDUCATION

Master of Social Work
Rutgers University

Bachelor of Arts in Social Work
Rutgers University

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**GET TO KNOW
LORRAINE**

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Lauren Manley MSW, MS PhD CANDIDATE

Dissertation: *A multi-methods exploratory study examining the lived experiences of women student veterans with military sexual trauma.*



STATEMENT

Lauren Manley is a PhD candidate at the Rutgers School of Social Work. Lauren served in the Texas Army National Guard and the U.S. Army. Her military service, and particularly her work as an Army sexual assault victim advocate, motivated her to pursue a career in social work. She is currently completing her dissertation, *A multi-methods exploratory study examining the lived experiences of women student veterans with military sexual trauma*. This study integrates data from surveys with embedded validated scales, interviews, and salivary stress biomarkers to holistically examine participants' lived experiences, service needs, stress, and coping.

In addition to her dissertation work, Lauren conducts research on **maternal morbidity and workplace mistreatment**. She served as the lead data analyst on a project that used machine learning techniques to predict maternal morbidity using pre-pregnancy medical claims and social determinant data; this project won second place in the NIH Maternal Health Challenge in 2024. Her research has been **published in journals focused on healthcare, sociology, and violence**. Lauren has taught sociology courses at the New Jersey Institute of Technology and in the BASW program at Rutgers University.



RESEARCH INTERESTS

- The impacts of sexual violence on stress, health, and coping
- The impacts of identity transitions on stress, health, and coping
- Workplace mistreatment
- Maternal morbidity



EDUCATION

Master of Social Work

Rutgers University

MS in Medical Microbiology and Cell Science

University of Florida

BS in Genetics

Texas A&M University Germanic Studies

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**GET TO KNOW
Lauren**

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Lena Moraa Obara, PhD, MS

Dissertation: *Exploring Coping Strategies and Support Systems For Gender-Based Violence Among Urban Refugee Women in Nairobi, Kenya: Insights Across Three Migration Phases*



STATEMENT

Lena Moraa Obara earned her Ph.D. in Social Work from Rutgers University in 2025 and is currently a postdoctoral associate at Columbia University. Broadly, Lena's research explores the **intersections of gender-based violence (GBV), environmental stressors, and social vulnerabilities among refugee and marginalized women**. Her dissertation, *Exploring coping strategies and support systems for gender-based violence among urban refugee women in Nairobi, Kenya: Insights across three migration phases*, incorporates perspectives from both survivors of GBV and service providers to highlight strategies across three critical stages of migration.

Lena's ongoing research explores how environmental stressors, **especially extreme weather events, interact with structural inequalities to increase the risks of violence and adversely impact the health and well-being of refugee women in urban informal settlements and refugee camp settings**. Her long-term goal is to create and assess community-led interventions that incorporate environmental and structural factors into GBV prevention and mental health services. Beyond her dissertation work, Lena has published on the connections between **interpersonal violence, mental health, well-being, and the environment**, mainly focusing on women in informal settings and vulnerable youth. Her work has appeared in leading journals across violence studies, environmental science, health, and psychology.

Lena is also an experienced educator and mentor, dedicated to integrating research, teaching, and community involvement to inform evidence-based practice and policy.



RESEARCH INTERESTS

- Gender-based violence (GBV) and survivor-centered interventions
- Structural and environmental determinants of health and violence risk in informal settings
- Forced displacement and resilience in refugee and informal urban contexts
- Policy integration of climate change adaptation and GBV prevention



EDUCATION

Master of Social Work

Rutgers University

Master of Sociology

University of Nairobi

BS in Industrial and Organizational Psychology

Makerere University

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**GET TO KNOW
Lena**

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ADDAM REYNOLDS, PhD, MSW

Dissertation: *The role of social contexts in associations between early life circumstances and cognitive aging: A work towards aging equity*



STATEMENT

Addam is currently a postdoctoral scholar of the University of Southern California Leonard Davis School of Gerontology. Addam graduated with his PhD in social work from Rutgers University. Broadly, Addam is a **social gerontologist** whose scholarship examines the **role of exposures to inequalities throughout the life course and its implications to health in older adulthood**. More specifically, Addam's work has demonstrated that larger social structures, such as racism and economic stratification, underlie associations between early life circumstances and cognitive aging in the United States. Currently, Addam is working on projects that include examining how **biological aging is accelerated** among those that **receive nursing home or home health care, if adult children's educational attainment** is associated with own biological and epigenetic aging, and if sexual and **gender minorities have elevated risk factors for cognitive impairment**.

Addam's dissertation was entitled, *The role of social contexts in associations between early life circumstances and cognitive aging: A work towards aging equity*. Briefly, his dissertation explored the role of **social stratification in underlying associations between risk/protective factors and cognitive aging**. Addam's dissertation demonstrated that the role of early life contexts in cognitive aging is conditional on multiple social positions. In addition to Addam's dissertation experience, Addam has published a total of 13 manuscripts, six of which have been first authored, and have appeared in high impact gerontology journals such as *Innovation in Aging* and the *Journals of Gerontology Series B: Psychological and Social Sciences*. Addam is a passionate and experienced educator, having taught the laboratory section of the advanced statistics sequence in the PhD program and research methods in the MSW program at Rutgers University.



RESEARCH INTERESTS

- Social inequalities and older adult health
- Black-White disparities in older adult health
- Facilitating sexual minority well-being in later life



EDUCATION

Master of Social Work
Rutgers University
BS, Biological Science
Rutgers University

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**GET TO KNOW
ADDAM**

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Yuhan Wei, MSW PhD CANDIDATE

Dissertation: *Disparities in Postsecondary Education Enrollment among Racial/Ethnic Minority Adolescents in the U.S*



STATEMENT

Yuhan Wei is a PhD candidate in the Rutgers School of Social Work. She completed her BA in Social Work at Jilin University, China, and then studied at Peking University for her MSW degree. Broadly, Yuhan's scholarship focuses on adolescent development, with a special focus on racially/ethnically diverse adolescents. More specifically, Yuhan focuses on how **individual-, family-, and community-level contextual characteristics affect adolescents' educational attainment, behavioral health, and well-being**. In her research she has explored how substance misuse affects adolescents' higher education goals, and how factors in adolescents' families and communities can offer protection.

Yuhan's dissertation is titled, *Disparities in Postsecondary Education Enrollment among Racial/Ethnic Minority Adolescents in the U.S*. In this quantitative study, she uses a comprehensive framework to explore how individual-, family-, and school-level factors impact adolescents' college enrollment choices. Yuhan has also **published research** about the **validation of scales for racially/ethnically diverse adolescents**, as well as about **interventions for adolescents' mental health**. Yuhan has taught Program Evaluation in the Rutgers MSW program.



RESEARCH INTERESTS

- Educational attainment disparities among racial/ethnic adolescents
- Protective factors for minority adolescents' behavioral health
- Measurement creation and validation for minority groups



EDUCATION

Master of Social Work
Peking University
BA, Social Work
Jilin University

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**GET TO KNOW
Yuhan**

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MELANIE YU, PhD, MSW

Dissertation: *Refugee reciprocity as a critical apparatus for reimagining resettlement work: A qualitative examination of refugee reciprocity and solidarity*



STATEMENT

Melanie Yu received her PhD from Rutgers University School of Social Work program in October 2025. Throughout her doctoral studies, she served as the full-time director of an intensive case management program for refugees. Her direct service experience, as both a case manager and director for an intensive case management program, deeply informed her scholarly trajectory and played a critical role in shaping the focus and development of her dissertation research and academic portfolio. In this capacity, she also supervised other social work students completing their fieldwork requirements.

Utilizing artifact elicitation and interviews with refugees and refugee-serving staff members, Mel employed a **constructivist grounded theory** approach to explore and **understand the concept of reciprocity** (giving and receiving help) **within a refugee community**. Her dissertation, entitled *Refugee Reciprocity as a Critical Apparatus for Reimagining Resettlement Work: A Qualitative Examination of Refugee Reciprocity and Solidarity* generated a working mid-range theory that illustrates how reciprocity functions and manifests in different refugee contexts. To date, she has published seven peer-reviewed articles, including one as first author. In addition to her research, she serves as an adjunct instructor in the Rutgers University School of Social Work master's program where she has taught Diversity and Oppression and Social Work with Refugees and Immigrants. She continues to work directly with refugee and immigrant communities through her ongoing role as director and case manager of an intensive case management program and by developing health education programming for refugee and immigrant communities.



RESEARCH INTERESTS

- Refugee and immigration policy
- Reciprocity, social support, and mutual aid
- Refugee peer services
- Qualitative research methods



EDUCATION

Master of Social Work

Rutgers University

Master of Arts, Psychology in Education

Teachers College, Columbia University

BA, Psychology

Rutgers University

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**GET TO KNOW
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