

Interview Transcription:

Ali Shameli PhD '20, interviewed by Linda Esquivel (Student Services Officer) on June 2020

[Shameli] My name is Ali Shameli and I'm a fifth year PhD student. I just did my defense, so I will be graduating soon. I just have to submit my thesis.

My area of research is Management Science and Engineering, but mostly Operations Research which involves a lot of theory and I've been worked on different types of projects; I've worked with some people in the CS department. I've worked with some professors in the Economics Department and my primary advisor in MS&E.

[Interviewer]: Can you tell me a little bit about your background? Where did you grow up, where did you study before Stanford?

[Shameli] I'm Persian. I was born and raised in Iran. I was in Esfahan which is one of the big cities in Iran, and then I did my undergrad at Shahrukh University of Technology, which is the top Tech University in Iran, which is basically most of the students you see here at Stanford that are Persian usually are from that University.

I studied software engineering and computer science in college and undergrad and then I moved to Stanford to do my PhD.

[Interviewer]: How did you become interested in engineering?

[Shameli] That's a very good Interviewer. So I have a few older brothers and they're all engineers. So, since when I was very young, like in middle school or high school, I always felt that I probably want to follow those footsteps. But I didn't want to follow them blindly. So I think my relationship with engineering is a little bit back and forth because I was always good at school and courses that required like more math and stuff. Because of that I gravitated more and more towards those types of courses and engineering in general. But I also gravitated more and more towards engineering because I was also better in those courses.

When I had to make a decision of what I want to study, it was almost very clear for me that I want to go towards engineering.

[Interviewer]: Can you tell us a bit about your research, what you're working on, and how did you get interested in it?

[Shameli] Yes. So my research, if I wanted put a tag on it, very generally, I would say its Operations Research.

Operations research, what it means basically is, they find something in real life— for example, some operations of a company, and then they try to model it mathematically. And after that, they analyze and optimize it to make something efficient— like to maximize revenue or maximum as welfare or something like that.

The reason I picked operations research was because I was very interested in the theory, but I also wanted to do something that has some kind of application because usually from what my understanding is, as you go towards courses that are more and more theory. Usually it is the case that there will be less and less application for your work. I thought operation research is kind of like a sweet spot which you can have both the theory and the application. So that's why I picked that area.

[Interviewer]: And then as far as like the research that you've done for your PhD.

[Shameli]: Initially when I started I was, which I think this is one of the very good traits of Stanford, which allowed me to do a bunch of different projects with different professors. So I did a project in the CS department. I did two different projects with different advisors in MS&E. My CS project was like more data science type of work. I did a project with a professor in the ECON department, which was like a little bit more economy. I did like mechanism design and like operations research, which is what I'm doing now and thought that's very interesting after doing all those rotations with different people. And so that's what I've been pretty much doing since my second year.

[Interviewer]: How do you imagine your research interests might change over the next five to 10 years?

For me, I think just because I want to experience something new, as I said, I've been doing like a lot of theory these days, and I'm thinking like maybe if I want to explore other areas, I would shift to a different type of theory in the next five to 10 years, or maybe do something a little bit more applied, which was something I was deep learning, for example, is like a very interesting topic these days. I've been learning it and maybe I want to see what's there.

But I think my research interest is a function of who I've worked with so far, my collaborators. They shift your understanding of different fields and your interests in terms of what Interviewers are interesting and what

Interviewers are not as interesting. It's also a function of how you feel about the methodology that you have to follow in answering some of the research Interviewers that you're facing in that area. And also just how interested you are in that problem and the application that it might have.

[Interviewer]: What are your career plans for after Stanford and how did you decide on them.

[Shameli] So for now, I'm graduating this summer. I'm also doing an internship, which is in finance and after that I'll be doing a postdoc at MIT.

To answer your Interviewer, I don't know what's going to happen after that, I think I'm just giving myself some more time to see what's out there and what my interests are and what type of work my interests and values are aligned with. But I think the most important thing in figuring out what you want to do is to just come up with a fixed set of values that are very clear. And then after you do that, I think everything becomes clear and you can easily choose your path.

The problem is, sometimes people have including myself, some conflicting values that like when someone says, I want to do something that is very intellectually satisfying. But someone else might say or want something that makes me a lot of money. And some of these values might be very conflicting and then that causes a lot of confusion. But I think the most important part is to just come up with a very clear value that you want to achieve and then things become clear, and I'm hoping to achieve that in the next year or so.

[Interviewer]: Yeah, that makes sense. Yes, I think that's good advice for anybody. What most excites you about your future?

[Shameli] Well, I think it's very interesting, not to know what's going to happen. I think, my future in terms of what I want to achieve has potential and I'm really excited to be working with people that are really high achievers and they've done great work. And I like, the not knowing, but knowing that there's potential and there is a lot of room to improve on, if you know what I wanted to do. I think that's very exciting.

[Interviewer]: What advice do you have for future students and how can they make the best use of their time at MS&E and Stanford?

[Shameli] I think one thing very special about Stanford, as a top university compared to maybe other schools is that you literally have some

of the brightest minds at Stanford, working in different areas of research because Stanford is the top ranked university in every field and that's very unique compared to some other universities. Because of this unique situation, one thing that is very important as a student at Stanford that you cannot get somewhere else is the great community that you have here. So I think the most important thing is to just create a lot of connections with different people, especially people that are interested in the same things that you are. These people are going to be probably in your social groups for the rest of your life and they can help you in your personal life and in your career. I think that's something very important. Another thing is, I think Stanford has really great classes.

Some people come to start with a pre-determined to like what they want to work on and what their interests are. But I think it would be great to come here and explore and take different classes to talk to different people. You also have some really fun classes, for example, horseback riding or wine tasting or dancing, all kinds of sports. I think after you graduate, if you do like your grad school here, it would be hard to find time to do all of these things. If I could go back, I probably would take some more of these courses in addition to the great scientific courses that we have.

[Interviewer]: Kind of like work-life balance but school-life balance.

[Interviewer]: What will you miss most about Stanford and MS&E or the Bay Area?

[Shameli]: That's a tough Interviewer. I mean, I'm still here, but I'm already missing it. Because everything has been in lockdown.

The first thing I would miss is definitely my community and all my friends here. I think this campus is very beautiful. I would definitely miss the campus, I would miss the Bay Area vibe is very interesting—we have Silicon Valley here, which is the center of technology on the planet. Basically, if you get an internship here, you just have to, from the house to your internship, it can be 10 minutes driving, so it's very close by.

And also the weather is really great here, and the nature – we have a lot of great walking trails, you have a lot of historic stuff like a San Francisco is very nearby. I think these are all very great resources.

[Interviewer]: So you're going to MIT, the weather is probably a little bit different there?

[Shameli] Yes, unfortunately. I'm very excited, but I think the weather I'm usually used to not very cold weather, like California weather. So I think it could be an adjustment.

[Interviewer] Is there anything else you wanted to add before we conclude?

[Shameli] For future students at Stanford University, I wish them the best of luck and I hope they make use of all the great resources here at Stanford and I hope they can find what they're interested in and then build the community with people that are interested in the same thing. And achieve great results.