1. Non-Technical Summary

A 1000 word (maximum) summary of the main research results, in non-technical language, should be provided below. The summary might be used by ESRC to publicise the research. It should cover the aims and objectives of the project, main research results and significant academic achievements, dissemination activities and potential or actual impacts on policy and practice.

The research project confirmed that the extent and complex variety of the populations in Turkey now referred to in Europe as Rom/Gypsy/Traveller has been under-represented. These groups cannot be simply divided into ethnic, regional, occupational or dialect groups, since each of these dimensions of identity cross-cuts the others, and the performance of these identities is marked by economic, social and political change, not least as they affect gender roles and relationships. These processes of change, spurred in part by EU candidacy, but more importantly driven by enduring values of post-Ottoman reformism, offer possibilities of new forms of community action and personal development, which are reflected in, as well being the subject matter of, exciting new academic/professional Romani Studies networks in Turkey. These developments offer important comparative data and corrective perspectives not only to Romani Studies specialities like linguistics and social development, but more generally to social science theory of identity within the evolution of “multiple modernities”.

All group identities are negotiated between members of the group and non-members of the group with whom they interact. When there is a massive disparity of power between the non-members and the members it is not surprising that the over-riding identity which defines the academic field is the one that comes from outside: we are discussing the populations called Çingene¹ in Turkish. When we then look at those populations in terms of broad narratives of origin associated with their dialects, then we may see 3 populations marked by dialects which indicate Indian origin, (albeit at different times):

a) somewhere between one and three million Roma/Romanlar,
b) perhaps 100,000 Dom, and
c) a much smaller group of Pocha, who appear similar to populations described as Lom in central Asia.

These three “Gypsy” populations are associated, respectively, with areas of Turkish, Kurdish and Armenian traditions. The great majority are sedentary although there are important commercial-nomadic strands. In the 19th century, however, “Ottoman orientalism” appropriated the ascription by European “scientific racism” of nomadism as a racial trait of “Gypsies”, with the consequence that a few thousand other commercial/service nomads such as Teber-Abdallar are also treated by majority society as Çingene.

Within these broad categories there are many other group-boundaries of ethnicity, dialect, religion, occupation and region, which cross-cut each other. Often identities are associated with ideologies of endogamy and ethnic purity, which may be why some of

¹ Usually translated as “Gypsy” in English. Marsh’s Ph.D. however, in part deconstructs the post-1400 European equation of etymons of “Egyptian” with etymons of “Athinganoi” as part of a far reaching revisionist analysis of Ottoman Gypsy history which is not part of, but does inform, the present research.
our best and most insightful informants are children of mixed marriages. We can also postulate that, as elsewhere in Europe, smaller ‘Gypsy’ groups may be absorbed by larger ones, which means that “family tree” models of ethnic differentiation are usually misleading. Almost all ‘Gypsy’ quarters (mehalle) we visited, had different groups, with differing economic and social status living near to each other, with the consequence that most daily living out of one’s identity is with respect to this mosaic of group identities, rather than to the gross disparity between Çingene and Turks. And many of these boundaries are established and policed by differences in the performance of gender identity: how marriage occurs, and what gender roles are encouraged or permitted.

These identities and roles should not be seen as fixed, however. We see no heuristic value in the Eurocentric binary of traditional/modern which so often substitutes for genuine historical enquiry. All the groups we spoke to had narratives about how things had changed, and evaluations of changes depended on personal orientations and what the changes are. ‘Traditionalism’ certainly exists as an ideology, but one whose main function is to manage adaptation to rapid social change. So we can see both personal and collective strategies for social mobility and change, which must be seen as part of culture, not as something separate or opposed to it. Furthermore we can see how the strategies we see in local group interactions surface also in the structuring of “modernising” non-governmental organisations. Important parts, therefore of the ethnographic data collected by the research are deep observations of the formation and actions of local Roma Associations (and of the first local Dom Association) and of the very first meeting of the National Romani Federation.

At this we could see the interaction of both Roma and non-Roma delegates from sponsoring transnational and inter-governmental organisations. We saw in the flesh the difference of approach between the human rights perspective of the EU and the Council of Europe (with its implicit agenda of damping down Roma migration) and the local discourses of communal mediation to try to cash in on incompletely realised ideals of Turkish republican solidarity (with their sub-text that migration may be one of the best strategies to escape localised inequality and racism.) Our ethnography suggests Rom and Dom alike approach the opportunities that this period of EU candidature offers with a political sense formed by their existing experience of inter-group relationships. The debates we hear in tents and shacks and tea-houses and urban flats form the wary optimism that emerging Roma community leaders bring to formal organisations. In this way we seek to demonstrate how political science must be informed by social ethnography. Political meetings are social interactions in the same universe and with much of the same underlying grammar as family meals.

The development of Romani Studies in Turkey reflects this new social optimism, and an important part of our research is a reflexive analysis of its own contribution to encouraging various other research projects, notably the OSI-sponsored European Roma Rights Centre’s survey of human rights, and a very preliminary start to laying the groundwork for the extension of the Manchester University Romani Language project to Turkey. Our contribution to policy debates brought considerable attention from various Turkish state authorities. We also briefed both Swedish and UK consular officials, and continued Marsh’s contribution to the Swedish Research Institute’s engagement with Roma affairs both in Istanbul and Sweden. We plan to compile an archive of our fieldwork observations, and a series of papers presenting our findings, starting with the Manchester University International Romani Studies Conference in September.