

Evaluating domestic tourists' attitudes to British weather. A qualitative approach

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Abstract

Previous research has attempted to develop and map quantitative measures of the climatic well being of tourists (eg Mieczowski's Tourism Climatic Index). These have been based on the assumption that a majority of tourists are entirely motivated by climatic conditions, of a certain and common nature. Mintel (1991) claimed that 73 percent of respondents to a UK survey cited 'good weather' as the main reason to go abroad. This study develops the idea that tourist decisions related to trips within the UK by UK residents has a far more sophisticated relationship with climatic conditions and these cannot be adequately captured by simple quantitative indices. The paper develops a qualitative methodology using in-depth discussion groups to investigate the importance of tourist memories and experiences in relation to climate. It is found that definitions of 'bad' and 'good' weather are more complex than quantitative indices suggest. Some people show ambivalence in their attitudes towards weather conditions and their decisions involve trade-offs between the risk of poor weather and other aspects of the holiday experience

Introduction

For 46% of the British public 'having a good holiday' is considered their highest spending priority (Mintel 2000) and the domestic market for tourism still accounts for 61% of all trips either to, from or within the United Kingdom (*table 1*). On the other hand, these trips account for a lesser percentage of total expenditure. Tourist-climate studies often seek to explain where climatic considerations are positioned amongst the set of factors that influence holiday location (and the timing of) decisions. According to many authors, for instance Perry (1997), climate constitutes an important part of the environmental context in which recreation and tourism takes place. However the influence of meteorological conditions will be dependent on the chosen activity and tourist expectations. Smith (1993) identified a distinction between 'weather-sensitive' tourism – where the climate is insufficiently reliable to draw mass participation and 'climate-dependent' tourism in which travel to a holiday destination is generated by the actual or perceived climatic attractiveness of the destination. The classification of any holiday into these broad types therefore relates to the tourist activity (eg beach tourism, mountaineering, sailing or sightseeing) and on local climatic conditions both in source and destination locations.

Table 1 United Kingdom Tourism (Mintel 2000)

	Trips (millions/%)	Nights (millions/%)	Expenditure (millions UK Pounds/%)
Domestic Market	123.5/61	435/36.3	14,875/26.5
Outbound Market	53.6/26.5	536/44.7	28,672/51.1
Inbound Market	25.5/12.6	228/19.0	12,605/22.4
Total	202.6/100	1199/100	56,112/100

It is proposed that domestic tourist decisions by United Kingdom residents can be viewed as 'weather-sensitive' and that actual climatic attractiveness exerts only a minor pull on

holidaymakers. Mintel (1991) claimed that 73 percent of respondents to a UK survey cited 'good weather' as the main reason to go abroad. In some instances, according to Mieczkowski (1985), many tourists are entirely motivated by climatic considerations. We assume that domestic tourists in the United Kingdom are unlikely to fall into this category.

Before making such an assumption it is necessary to determine which climatic factors, or combination of climatic factors are relevant. Writers, such as Davis (1968) and Mieczkowski (1985), have identified temperature, sunshine and rainfall amounts as most important. Climatic means for United Kingdom resorts compare unfavourably with, for example, Mediterranean resorts. In efforts to capture combined effects of weather variables, indices have been developed to assess tourism climate. Mieczkowski's Tourist Climatic Index (TCI), for instance, is based on a relatively sophisticated arithmetic formula which employs weighted measures of temperature, humidity, rainfall and sunshine to quantify the suitability of a location to tourism.

There exists a growing literature on the use of climatic indices to rate the climatic suitability of a location to tourist activity. However these have been based on the assumption that a majority of tourists are motivated by climatic conditions, of a certain and common nature. In the development of this index and similar quantitative measures there is little evidence relating to how preferences were assessed. In many cases this climate attractiveness is entirely derived from energy balance type equations based on sedentary individuals. Although these provide highly accurate and potentially useful information such positivist approaches fail to recognise the social contexts of individual decision-making. This study therefore employs an alternative qualitative approach to the investigation of climate resources.

Methodology

In undertaking this piece of research we have adopted the epistemology of cultural geography. According to this perspective 'society does not comprise an isolable, unitary, internally coherent whole' (Amit-Talai, 1995, 223). There is in fact no common vision of the world. 'Instead society is seen as multicultural, comprising a complex myriad of different socially defined (constructed) groups each with their own 'ways of seeing'. (Matthews, Limb and Taylor, 1998, 311). These textual communities are not all equally represented in the decision-making of society. Rather, while some are insiders in positions of power, others are marginalised as outsiders. In conducting this study we have purposefully chosen examples of both insider and outsider groups.

The methodology adopted is qualitative and more specifically involves in-depth discussion groups. These are not focus groups which meet once and tend to deal with issues in a frenetic and superficial way. In-depth discussion groups meet more than once. They are run using principles of group analysis and allow a group identity and memory to be created. This approach has been found to be more sensitive to people's expression of feelings, meanings and environmental values. Such a perspective is valuable because as long as the variety and richness of people's environmental values go unexpressed they cannot be represented in the public domain.

In geography, groups were pioneered successfully (Burgess, Limb and Harrison, 1988) have become widely accepted (Special Issue of *Area* 1996) and have been recently and extensively used (Bedford and Burgess 2001, Kneale 2001, Jackson 2001 and Crang 2001).

There are a number of key aspects of the research project. These include recruitment, conducting the groups, collecting the data and interpreting the data. In choosing who to include in our groups we were keen to have groups which traditionally have been seen as insiders (professional males and middle class walkers) and outsiders (children and mums with preschool children). The groups were run according to principles of best practice (Burgess,

Harrison and Limb 1988) by a conductor and an observer. The Conductor’s responsibilities included listening, using silences, not asking direct questions, drawing in silent members, keeping “to task”, handling conflict and protecting individuals. Data was recorded on tape (with the participants’ permission) and were transcribed by either the conductor or observer. The group discussions generated 12-15,000 words of data per group. The interpretation of the data was started immediately after the discussion in the form of a debrief between the conductor and the observer. Thematic analysis of the transcripts was then undertaken generating *in vivo* (drawn from the discussions) and *meta* (drawn from the literature) codes. These themes were then written up under the following headings:

1. Placing weather in perspective
‘Good’ and ‘bad’ things about holidays
Favourite UK holiday memory
Most recent UK holiday
2. Deconstructing ‘good’ and ‘bad’ weather
3. The social context of holiday decision-making
4. Dimensions of the weather experience

Findings

The first part of the analysis seeks to place weather in perspective by examining the importance of weather in the context of people’s discussions of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ things about holidays. The purpose of this exercise was to investigate the role of weather in people’s evaluation. For mums and professional males there is a wide range of factors that affect their evaluation of a holiday (see *table 2 and 3*) Weather is mentioned by all three groups but is particularly important for the mums because of their concern about how their children would cope with hot weather. Interestingly they see hot weather as a problem rather than an advantage.

Table 2 Responses to question: What’s good about holidays?

<i>What’s good about holidays?</i>		
Male Professionals	Mothers	Children
Different cultures	Leaving everything behind	Weather
Different food	Getting outside more	Different scenery
Something worth photographing	Fewer toys, so children are more resourceful	Chance to relax
Escaping domestic tasks	Getting away from jobs	Away from it all
Natural history	Getting away from routine	Getting brown
Being active	Everybody is more relaxed	
Exploration	Change of scenery	
Restaurant and meals	Spending time with children	
Good weather	Extra money	
Drinking	Children enjoying being with both parents	
Trekking		
Relaxing		
Varies over lifecycle		

The next part of the analysis seeks to put weather in perspective by uncovering a favourite UK holiday memory. This was achieved by using a relaxation and retrospective exercise with the groups in which they went back to a favourite UK holiday memory using their imagination and then drew a picture of what they had remembered. Such exercises have been observed before to generate particularly vivid memories. The experiences which were described by the groups reflect a variety of elements. Weather is not mentioned by the professional males group (*figure 1*) but plays an important part in memories from the children’s (*figure 2*) and mums’ groups (*figure 3*).

The third and final part of the analysis seeks to put weather in perspective by examining people’s memories of their most recent UK. Experiences again reflect a variety of elements. Weather features in 3-4 of children’s descriptions (*figure 4*) and all of the mum’s group descriptions (*figure 5*) . There is no mention of weather by professional males (*figure 6*) .

Our conclusions from these three analyses is that rather than being a distinct and isolated variable, weather is embedded in the fabric of holiday life. There are a wide variety of other factors which play a part in people’s evaluation and memories of holiday experiences. There is variation within and between groups in the extent to which weather features. In particular the Professional Males group do not mention weather. It is therefore important to investigate why that may be the case.

Table 3 Responses to the question: What’s bad about holidays?

<i>What’s bad about holidays?</i>		
Male Professionals	Mothers	Children
Don’t want to lie on beaches	Still hard work with children	Miss friends
Turbulence	Travelling time	Coming home is an anti-climax
Not sitting by the pool with kids screaming	Rain when camping	
Train breaking down	Entertaining the children when its raining	
Theme nights and lunches	Having to take so much ‘kit’	
Lack of access to the landscape	High temperatures so children cannot sleep	
Rain and poor weather	Delays when flying	
Brits abroad		
Union Jack T-shirts		
Insects		
Litter		
Sewage		
Unfriendly natives		

We then moved on to try and deconstruct ‘good’ and ‘bad’ weather according to the groups. If we examine children’s responses to ‘good’ and ‘bad’ weather we find quite a complex and ambivalent picture of their definitions (*table 4*). On the one hand there is a clear view among the children that bad weather can spoil a holiday and the elements of bad weather-cloud, rain and low temperatures are identified. On the other hand there is a recognition that hot weather presents a risk of burning and sunstroke. Although rain was seen as a threat to a good holiday, opportunities to spend time with the family indoors when it’s raining were still welcomed.

The professional males give a very different response (*table 5*). They provide no clear definitions of what constitutes ‘good’ and ‘bad’ weather. Rather they see rain as a natural hazard when walking or exploring and argue that they enjoy it anyway. Much emphasis is placed by them on having realistic expectations and a positive attitude whatever the weather. Their indifference to the weather may explain why weather does not feature in their evaluations and experiences analysed earlier. There is however an acknowledgement that, at its extreme, poor weather (in the form of low cloud and rain) can be dangerous when hill walking. They also point out that they do seek to avoid very hot weather by choosing carefully where and when to go. They too therefore express some ambivalence in their attitudes to weather.

Table 4 Children's attitudes to holiday weather

Good Weather	Bad Weather	Ambivalence	Irrelevance
Hot, but not sticky	If abroad – more significant	Sunstroke and sunburn	Enjoyment whatever the weather
Sunny, but with a breeze	Brochures are inaccurate	Need to spend time in the shade	Importance of the 'family thing'
Relaxing	Ruins the day, Places close	Caught out by the English sun	Rain is irrelevant
Predictable	Can't go out, can't go on the beach	Enjoy rain – sit inside and drink cocoa	
Sunshine makes you feel bright and you want to do things	Not what you come on holiday to do	Clouds give you a headache	
Warmth is important	Sit indoors and watch TV		

Table 4 Male Professionals attitudes to holiday weather

Good Weather	Bad Weather	Ambivalence	Irrelevance
	Rain when outdoors	Too hot	Enjoy the outdoors anyway
	Expectations	Choice of when to go	
	Attitude	Weather and season are intertwined	
	Weather can be dangerous		

One of the things we were interested in examining was the extent to which social context figured in decision-making about weather and holiday locations. To that end we chose groups who might be seen to be very different in terms of their freedom of choice. Children and mums with young children have long since been recognised as less powerful groups within society. Whereas our professional males and middle class walkers might be seen as more privileged in this respect.

Our discussions with the children suggested that there was a difference in the group between a minority whose parents consulted them about holiday decisions (including likely weather conditions) and the majority for whom such decisions were out of their hands. In particular there were several examples of how a parental preference for hot weather took priority over the children's desire for cooler conditions.

For the group of mums with young children there was a constant compromise between what weather adults might prefer and what weather they would deem suitable for their children. *'since having the children...it's kind of been dictated by the children...the adults have had to make compromises with the children'* (Session 2:722-4). Compromising is not only restricted to children. When asked if holidaying with family involved compromises about desirable weather conditions one mum replied *'All the time, and I just go 'whatever'....I do think if everybody else is going to be happy then that makes me happy'* (Session 2: 719, 724-5)

Such compromises were not evident in discussions with professional males who seem able to exert a strong personal choice in their decision-making. Equally such compromises were also not evident among the ramblers with the exception of one male member whose wife's ill health made a hot weather holiday impossible. There seems to be a clear division between groups who are relatively less or more powerful in making choices about holiday weather conditions.

Part of our purpose in conducting this research project was to explore the diversity and richness of people's experience. We wanted to go beyond an objective analysis of weather, consisting of temperature, precipitation, wind and cloud, to examine our groups' intersubjective experiences of weather. There was no doubt that the children were tuned into the fact that weather affects moods and the emotions (cloudy weather makes you moody, warmth gives you the incentive to get up and do something). To illustrate this point further we have chosen the following extracts from the transcripts.

(Mum with pre-school children describing favourite UK holiday memory) *'It's just a particular day which was so brilliant...it was one day walking in Wales, in Snowdonia, walking up a mountain Cadre Iris and it was just a really baking hot sunny day and it was just clear blue skies and really exhilarating because we managed to walk up –and it wasn't that hard a walk-but it was a nice, you know, walk-really fresh and we got half way up and the lake was beautiful, clear lake and it just looked so inviting and we just dived in fully clothed and it was just lovely.'* *It was the most refreshing swimming I've ever had and then carried on walking and we were dry within however long- not long because it was so sunny and hot and then sitting on the top we could just see the whole shape of Wales just about.... The sea and the coastline and just see for miles'* (Session 2: 147-156).

(Another mum describing a favourite UK holiday) *'The scenery and the place was fantastic and I just remember going dipping in and out of the rivers on horseback and drinking the water and stopping for picnics in really idyllic spots with the smell of the ferns and this dappled sunlight through the trees.'* (Session 2: 189-191)

(Another mum responding to a picture of a snow scene) *'I do actually love being in a ski resort because I just think that the scenery and the atmosphere and the snow and just the whole thing about it is really nice...and the sunset and the way that the sun usually streams down the valley at the end of the day'* (Session 2: 478-481).

(Male rambler) *'Yes I think obviously warmish-not too hot sort of weather. But I think that all of us would say that we've enjoyed the experience perhaps of-not necessarily of walking in the rain but walking in the cloud-walking in overcast weather because you often see the countryside in a quite different light and certainly when I'm doing sort of higher walks the sort of broody nature of the countryside can be enhanced by cloud cover and the occasional – you sort of get the feeling of remoteness and isolation when there's clouds over the sky and there's a bit of wind and the clouds are skudding'*.

(Male rambler) *'I like to see-not continuous cloud cover but I like to see you know shower clouds, different cloud formations...I'd rather see different clouds...continuous blue sky after a while gets boring'*

(Male rambler) *'It can and it comes back to the point you made and it (weather) does change the lighting and you get shade and light, shade and if you're on high ground you can see these areas of shade and light around and it does give some enhancement'*

(Male rambler) *'I can remember seeing storm clouds and a dreadful storm building up over Kinder from Mam Tor and sort of looking across and seeing the clouds rolling up and seeing the lightening in the sky when we were staying quite nice and dry-those sorts of experiences are not to be missed.'*

(Female rambler) *'If you're walking in East Anglia out towards the East coast then that's what you have to rely on is actually the skyscape as opposed to undulating land...so you're looking at the sky so you do need cloud to give you interest. It's a whole different scene.'*

(Male Rambler) *'A good point about light whoever made that –I think if you walk a lot different light at different times of the year and different surroundings are important.'*

Two further comments were made in responses to photographs

(Male Rambler) *'It's not just the terrain as the whole picture. One the sky-it's the sort of day which I would enjoy walking in where it looks as if there is a movement-a moving sky so you've got changes of light, sky movement'*

(Female Rambler) *'I like sort of lighting, misty...it's a landscape that will sort of hold me. It pulls you on-it's sort of tantalising. I can think that this will be changing because the mists will be swirling round and changing'*

From these extracts we begin to see evidence for a more complex and intimate appreciation of weather. In particular weather has a role in lending light, colour, character, movement and atmosphere to scenery.

Conclusion

We acknowledge that our study only begins to explore the values and meanings that people have towards weather. However, there are a number of conclusions which we tentatively make. First, weather is not a distinct and isolated variable, rather it is embedded in people's holiday experience. Second, it is clear that different groups of people evaluate and remember weather in different ways. Third, 'good' and 'bad' weather are not absolute concepts but vary with circumstances and individual's preferences. Indeed, people have ambivalent attitudes to weather. Fourth, we have found that responses to weather conditions are mediated by other factors such as company, activity and expectations. Decision-making about holiday locations and weather take place in a social context which involves negotiations between family and/or friends and constrains some people more than others. Finally we would suggest that the qualitative method illustrates that experiences of weather are rich and engage the emotions and senses in ways which are not readily evident through quantitative analysis.

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Figure 1 Map of responses of male professionals – most recent holiday in the UK

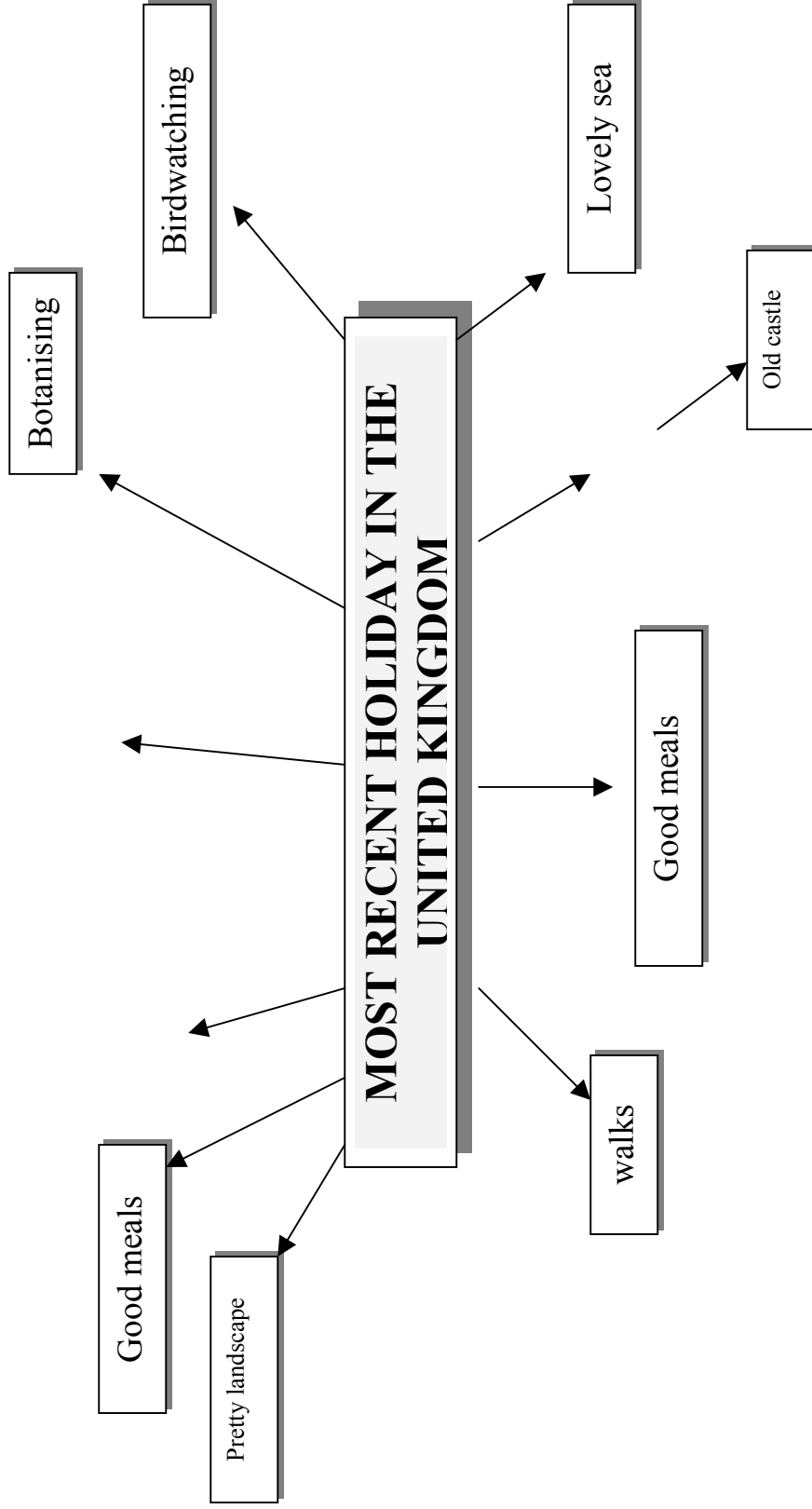


Figure 2 Map of responses – Children – most favourite holiday memory in the UK

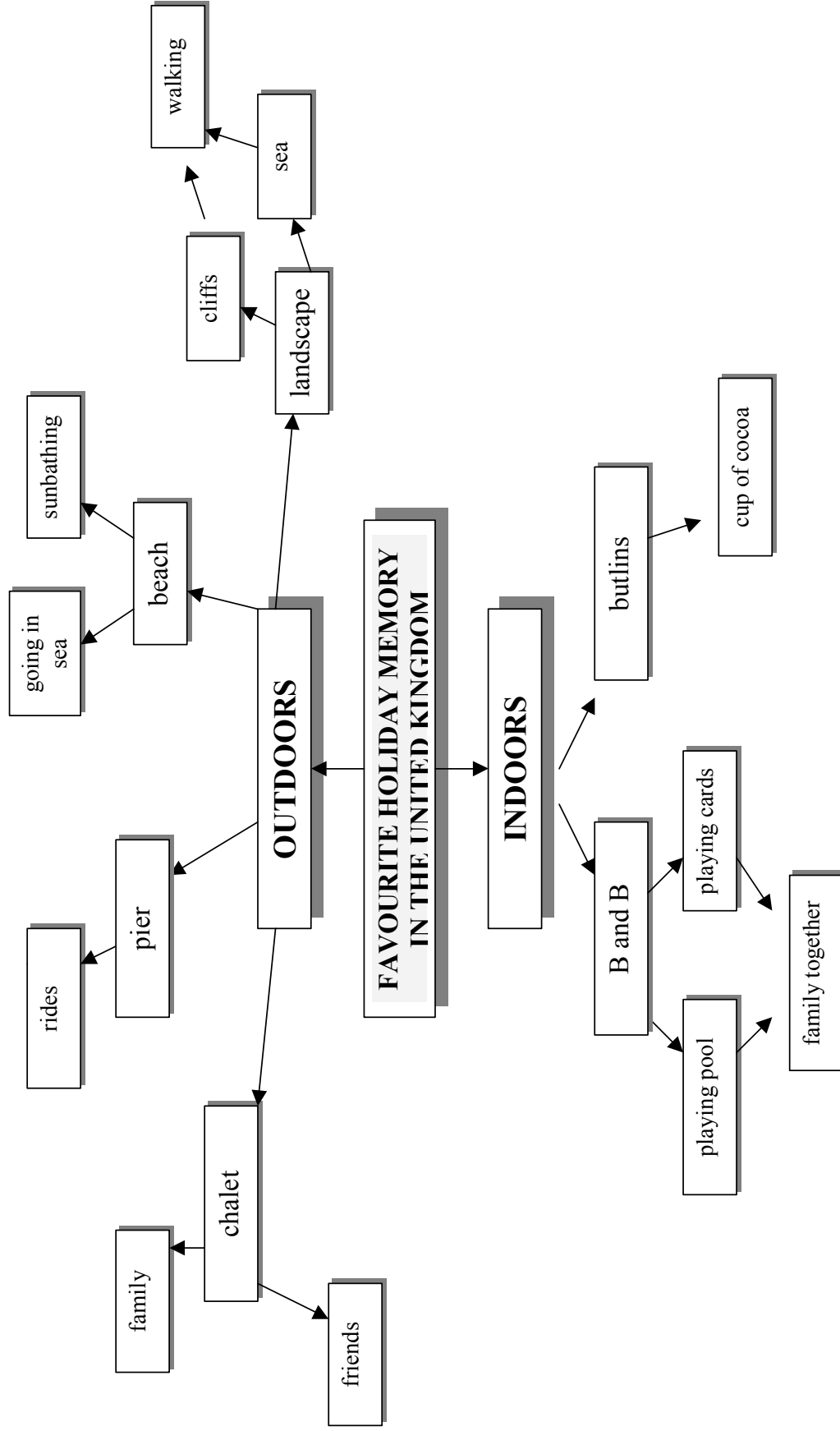


Figure 3 Map of responses – mothers - most favourite holiday memory in the UK

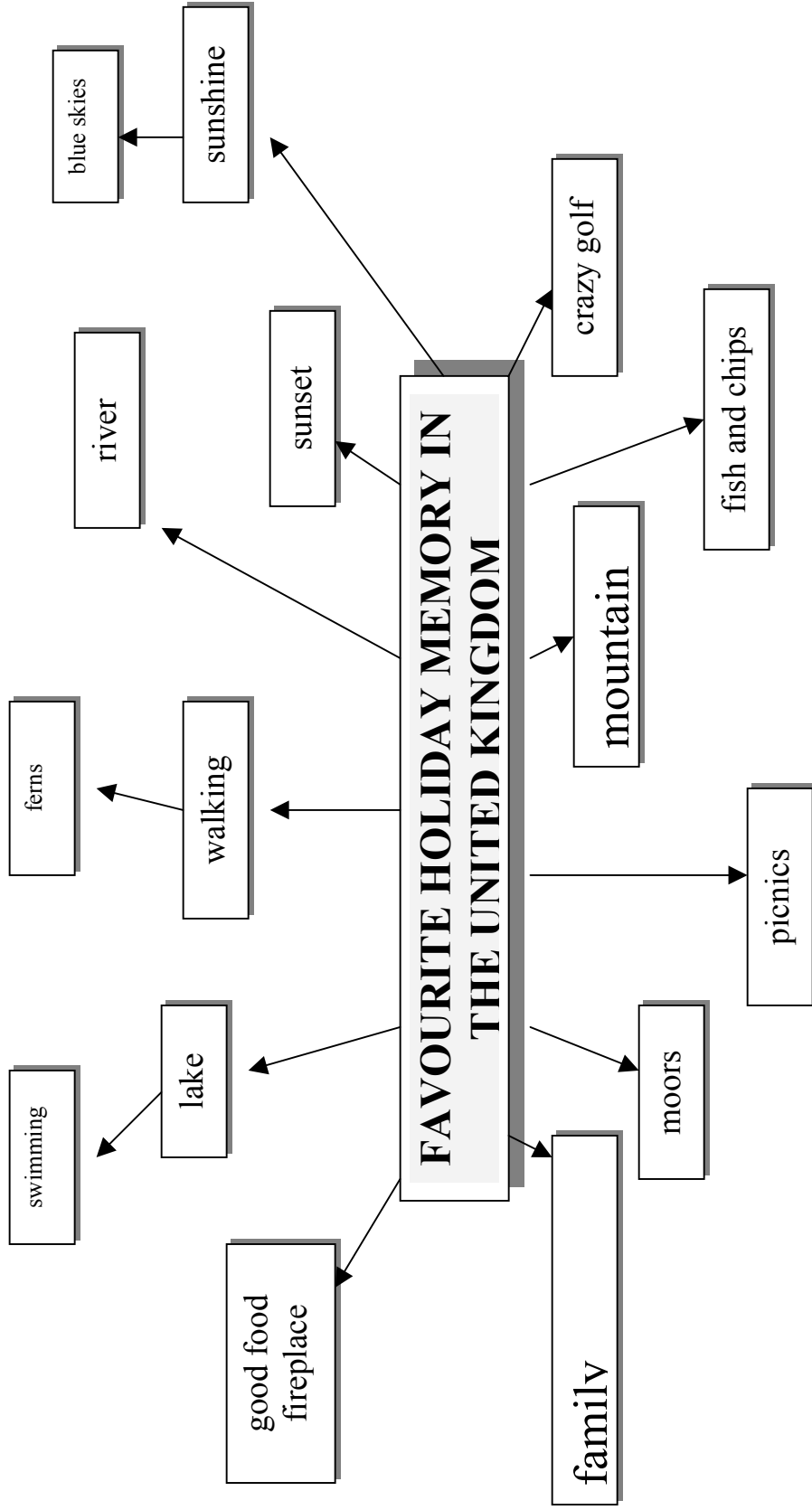
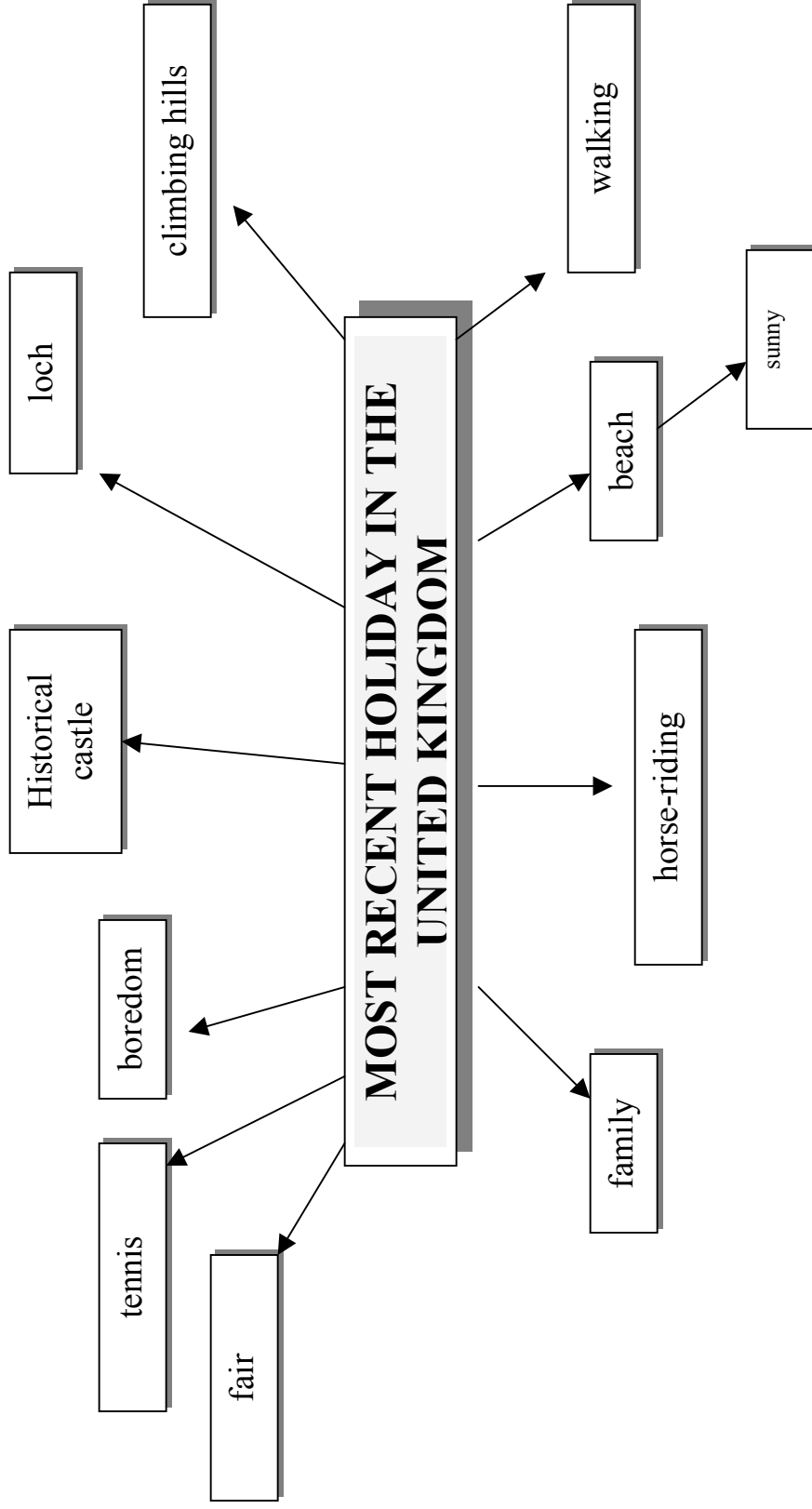


Figure 4 Map of responses of children – most recent holiday in the UK



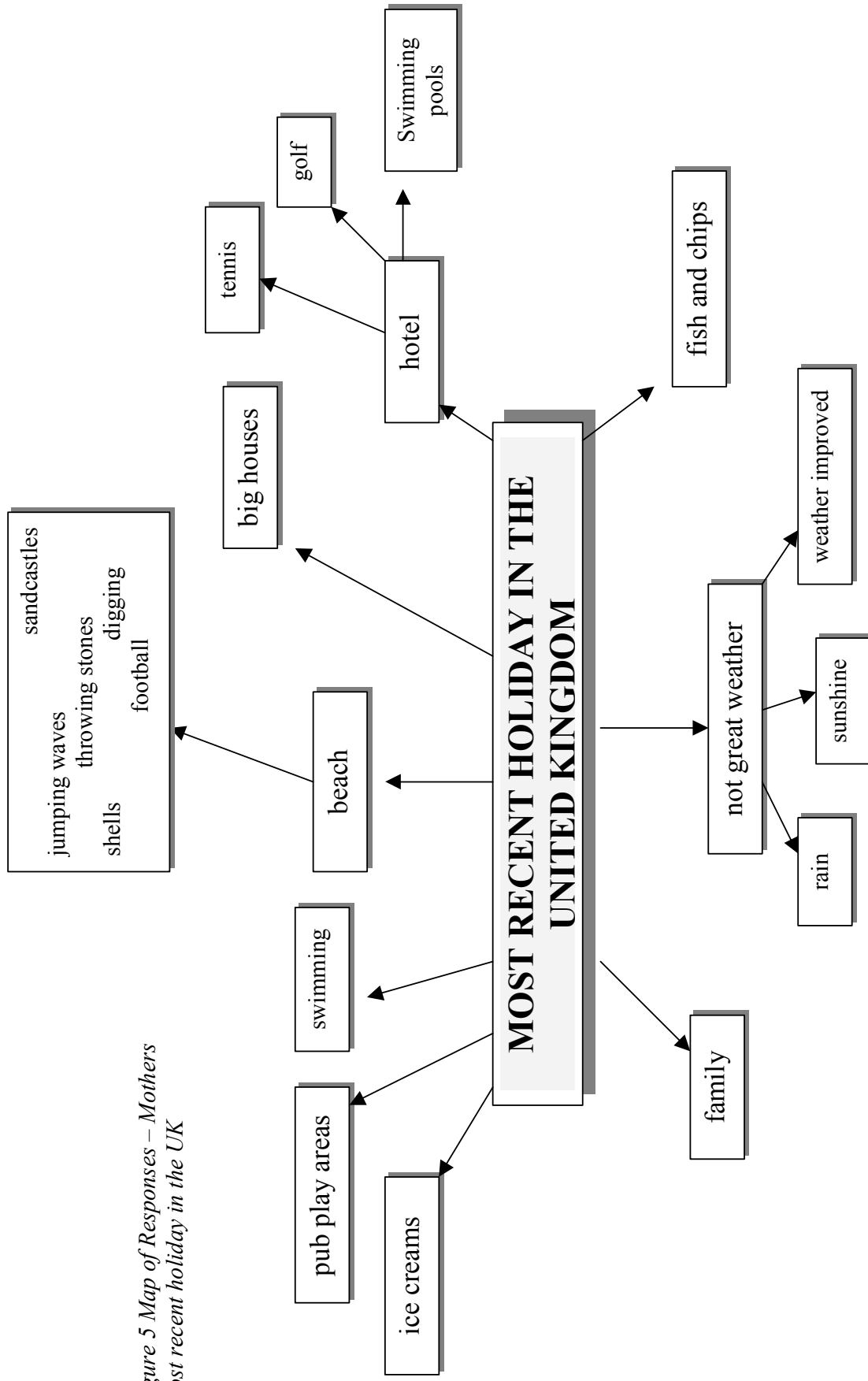


Figure 5 Map of Responses – Mothers
Most recent holiday in the UK

Figure 6 Map of responses of professional males – most recent holiday in the UK

