Using relevant examples, explain ways in which ethical issues can be dealt with in psychological research. (15 marks)

Legislation, such as the Nuremburg Code (1947) is one way of dealing with ethical issues in psychological research. However, this lacks enforcement as it is very rarely policed as it is exceedingly difficult to do so. This means that often psychologists can get away with unethical experiments, such as Harlow (1959). Harlow conducted a study on monkeys where they were separated from their mother in infancy and given a ‘monster mother’ which gave them pain and distress – they were then put on a device known as a ‘rape rack’ to be inseminated so that their ability to rear offspring could be assessed.

One ethical issue in human research is deception. BPS guidelines state that participants should be able to give informed consent – this means that they should know what the study involves and they agree to take part. Often this is not possible as the aim of the study needs to remain hidden - for example in Milgram’s study of obedience the Ps needed to believe that the shocks were real and were being given for the learning test.

One way of dealing with this problem is to gain prior general consent or presumptive consent. This is where the researcher asks the general public if they would agree to take part in the study and then presumes that the Ps feel the same way. Milgram asked a group of ‘reasonable people’ if they would agreed to take part and they said they would. Zimbardo assumed that because the Ps had agreed to take part in a ‘prison study’, they had consented to the procedure. However, in some experiments the researcher could not have known how Ps would behave but they were criticised for the deception.

Another way of dealing with this issue is debriefing the Ps at the end of the study. Milgram showed the P that Mr. Wallace was not harmed by the ‘shocks’ and he explained the procedure fully and gave the Ps the opportunity to withdraw their data. Asch also used deception in his conformity research as it was essential to the hypothesis, but he fully debriefed them after the study so that they understood what they had taken part in.

Although, there are limited legal implications for psychologists conducting unethical research, professional sanctions are the main consequences. Meaning that those guilty of unethical research risk losing their job, qualifications and reputation (life’s work). This would stop most, since as scientists they would want to publish their findings in journals for theirs and societies benefit. But there is always the fact that this does not stop unethical research from happening – any research conducted in secret and not published is not illegal. The tearoom sex study by Humpreys (1970) is an example of professional sanctions because his PhD was threatened because of how unethical his observations were. In that he deceived the Ps and did not acquire informed consent, because of this when the study was published many participants suffered psychological harm. Although no names were revealed, Ps felt