Using relevant examples explain why ethical issues are important in research with human participants in psychology. (15 marks)

One issue when using human participants in psychological research is that of deception. This is an issue because participants (Ps) should be aware of what they are taking part in and agree to the procedure of the study. If Ps are deceived they may feel distressed when they do not know what is happening in the study. For example, in Asch (1955) study of conformity in unambiguous situations, the naïve Ps did not know that everyone else in the study was a confederate and was deliberately giving the wrong answers. Meaning when the P wanted to give the correct answer, they felt distressed and confused. This is important as participants were clearly distressed prior to the debriefing, and during the debriefing the Ps said they believed that “I am wrong, they are right”. Others said that they thought the majority were the “victim of an optical illusion” or they thought they were ‘deficient’ in comparison to the other Ps. If psychologists were to simply deceive all Ps at will, trust in psychologists would diminish and people would be reluctant to participate in research.

Distress/harm is another ethical issue. This is important because Ps should not suffer during the research and should leave any study in the same condition as when they arrived. Ps in Milgram’s study (who thought they were causing serious pain/damage to another human being) showed extreme signs of distress during his experiment, e.g. they were shaking - 3 Ps even had seizures. The Ps in Zimbardo’s (1971) prison study were so distressed by their role as prisoner that the experiment had to be stopped after only 6 days (8 days before the planned end date). The issue of harm is especially important as psychologists have an obligation to improve the quality of human existence, but also to do no harm to any human being. Who decides which human being should suffer permanent damage for the ‘greater good’?

Ethical issues must be considered by ethics committees whose purpose is to review the potential harm that Ps may suffer and decide whether or not this is justified or necessary to test the hypothesis. If so then the committee will look at whether the benefits from the research are greater to the whole population than the distress caused to the individual Ps. Beaman et al. (1978) carried out an investigation into bystander behaviour. Specifically, whether a bystander refusing to help someone, will mean other bystanders will also refuse to help and the person in need could be in a worse condition. Ps found themselves walking past someone who was slumped over a bike in the street. Of those who had the lecture about bystander behaviour, 50% stopped to help compared to 25% of the other students. This shows that knowledge of research can make one more aware of one’s influences on behaviour and one’s impact on society as a result. This raising of awareness may improve society as a whole and enhance the experience of being human. Thus, in this particular case, the deception of the students was outweighed by the benefits to their behaviour.