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Few people disagree on the need for sustainable development, but ideas about what it exactly means and how to pursue it diverge considerably. Although such normative conflicts are key to sustainability transitions, attention to such conflicts is lacking in transition studies. In this paper we understand societal conflict as an informal assessment of sustainable transition pathways with the potential for learning about normative ideas about the direction, speed and means of transitions. We analyse the Dutch societal conflict on the plans for shale gas exploration between 2010 and 2013, based on a media-analysis and interviews, in order to identify the normative conflicts and to find out to which extent these normative conflicts resulted in higher-order learning. The two main normative conflicts in the case firstly concern the role of gas in the energy transition, and secondly the balance between local and national interests in defining the public interest. With that, the societal conflict challenges two key elements of the Dutch welfare state. We conclude that there has been higher-order learning as regards the first conflict, but not as regards the second.

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